



The messy politics of local climate assemblies

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Abstract

In recent years, many local authorities in the UK have run local climate assemblies (LCAs) such as citizens' assemblies or juries, with the goal of developing citizen-led solutions to the climate crisis. In this essay, we argue that a 'convenient fiction' often underpins the way local authority actors explain the rationale for running LCAs. This convenient fiction runs as follows: LCAs are commissioned as a response to the climate threat, and local decision-makers work through LCA recommendations to implement appropriate policies in their locality. We suggest that this narrative smooths over and presents as linear a process that is in fact messy and political. LCAs emerge as a result of political pressure and bargaining. Once LCAs have run their course, the extent to which their recommendations are implemented is dependent on power dynamics and institutional capacities. We argue that it is important to surface the messiness and political tensions that underpin the origins and aftermath of local climate assemblies. This achieves three things. First, it helps manage expectations about the impact LCAs are likely to have on the policy process. Second, it broadens understandings of how LCAs can contribute to change. Third, it provides a complex model that actors can use to understand how they can help deliver climate action through politics. We conclude that LCAs are important — if as yet unproven — new interventions in local climate politics, when assessed against this more complex picture.

Keywords Deliberative democracy · Climate emergency · Local authority · Climate assembly · Climate politics

1 Introduction

Since 2019, dozens of UK local authorities have commissioned citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, or similar processes to develop citizen-led solutions to the climate crisis (Bryant & Stone 2020; Wells et al. 2021) — we will refer to these as LCAs (local climate assemblies). The proliferation of LCAs is part of a wider 'wave' of deliberative forums which aim to deepen democratic participation and practice, through giving citizens the opportunity to discuss complex policy problems including, but not limited to, climate change (OECD 2020).

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LCAs involve recruiting citizens who are demographically representative of a locality to form a citizens' assembly or jury. Usually, between twenty and a hundred people gather for multiple meetings to hear from experts and deliberate about how to achieve net-zero (Bryant & Stone 2020). Once recommendations are developed, they are presented to the local authority which responds to and usually commits to taking forward (some of) their recommendations.

As authors, we are researchers of climate politics and deliberative democracy. In addition, all four of us have been involved in setting up, advising or running LCAs. In this essay, we draw on our experience of being practically involved with LCAs as well as existing academic research.

Our argument is that a 'convenient fiction' often underpins the way local authority actors and others explain the rationale for running LCAs. This convenient fiction smooths over and presents as linear a process which is messy and political. It is important to surface the messiness and political tensions that underpin the origins and uses of local climate assemblies. In practical terms, this helps manage expectations about the limited direct impact LCAs are likely to have on the policy process and broadens actors' appreciation of how LCAs can contribute to change. Complicating the convenient fiction, as we will do here, also contributes to existing academic literature in this journal and elsewhere which makes the overarching point that LCAs (Wells et al. 2021) and the accompanying climate emergencies they usually flow from (Howarth et al. 2021) should be understood as complex and inherently political processes which cannot be understood through recourse to simplistic analytic frameworks. We now turn to describing the outline of this convenient fiction regarding the origins and use of LCAs.

2 A convenient fiction

The following narrative about LCAs is often used by political actors:

Step 1: Climate change is identified as an existential threat by scientists.

Step 2: Local authority (or other local body, e.g. a local climate commission) announces a LCA after declaring a climate emergency.

Step 3: Citizens are invited to participate through a process of sortition. The LCA meets over the course of various meetings, produces and presents its recommendations, which the local authority then accepts and/or combines with its own net zero policies.

Step 4: Net zero policies are enacted locally.

Step 5: The local area has fulfilled its climate responsibilities.

We present this narrative in Fig. 1, which makes explicit the role that different groups of actors are imagined as playing at each stage of the process.

To give one example of this story in use, on the Oxford City Council website, the council provides an explanation about why it set up a LCA. It points to the 2018 IPCC report as the starting point for the decision to set up a LCA. It then says that the 'citizens assembly... consider[ed] the measures that should be taken in Oxford... to reduce Oxford's carbon emissions to net zero' (Oxford City Council 2019). The website implies a narrative: there is a start (the IPCC report), a middle (a citizens' assembly) and an end (climate change is addressed). Similar narratives are found elsewhere (e.g. Copeland Borough Council 2021; Lancaster City Council 2019; Nottingham Climate Assembly 2020).

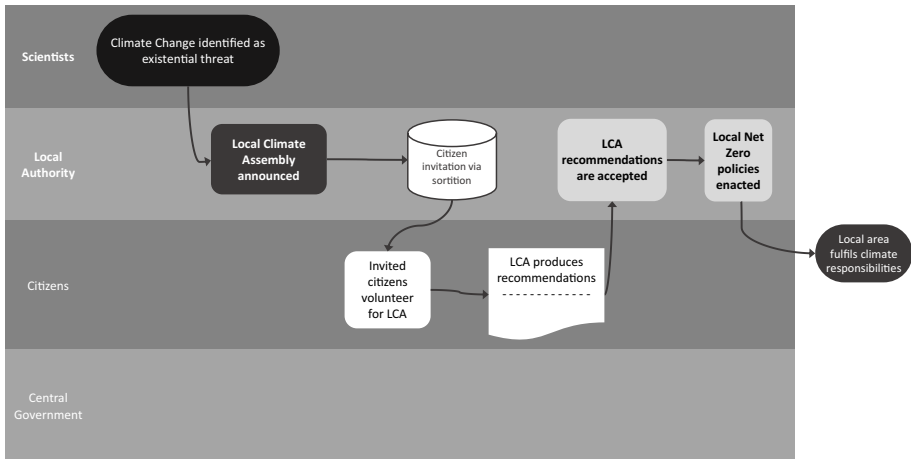


Fig. 1 Role that different groups of actors are imagined as playing at each stage of the process

Note the presentation of an *orderly* and *linear* trajectory — each stage progresses unidirectionally from one stage to the next, until the process is completed. Furthermore, the narrative is told in *depoliticised* terms — dynamics of coalition-forming and contestation by different groups of social actors are not incorporated within it.

Presenting LCAs in this way could be perceived to be tactically helpful. It provides a clear rationale for why LCAs are worth setting up, which is important given the costs and other resources involved in running LCAs. Furthermore, by presenting the origins of LCAs as driven by imperatives emerging from scientific consensus, and by minimising the role played by different political actors, the narrative pre-emptively addresses criticisms of undue influence on local authority decision-making by specific political groups. However, as we will argue in Sect. 4, deploying an overly simplified convenient fiction risks leading to unintended consequences and missing the political potential of LCAs. In the analysis that follows, we will surface the messy dynamics that LCAs are enmeshed within, and which are absent from the official accounts. In so doing, our intention is to provide a tool that local authority actors, citizens and others can use to amplify the productive political uses to which LCAs can be put.

3 The messy politics of local climate assemblies

Figure 2 is an alternative depiction of the origins, uses and potential aftermath of LCAs. It incorporates messiness, feedback loops and political contestation.¹ In this section, we will guide readers through this diagram. See Fig. 3 in the diagram keys.²

¹ It should be noted Fig. 2 is not exhaustive. There are factors and dimensions which we have not included due to lack of space. It should be read as one potential diagrammatical representation that builds in messiness and politicisation.

² The key for the diagram is in the Appendix of this article.

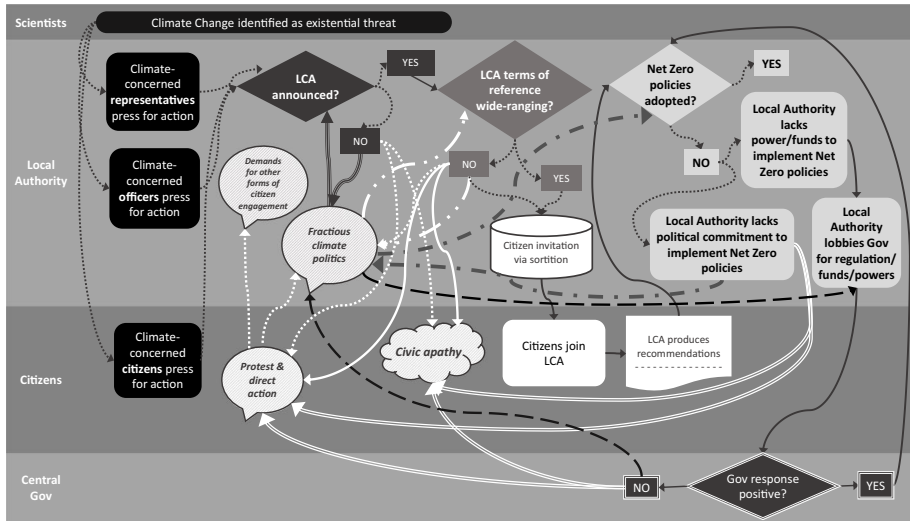


Fig. 2 Alternative depiction of the origins, uses and potential aftermath of LCAs

3.1 The origins of LCAs

On the left-hand side of Fig. 2, we include the role that different groups of actors played in starting the LCAs wave. In contrast to Fig. 1, Fig. 2 explicitly recognises the political and sometimes contested nature of the origins of different LCAs. Thus, there is recognition of the role played by citizens and different actors within local authorities, in addition to climate commissioners and scientists.³

In some areas, climate-minded representatives acted within councils and/or (tacitly) joined forces with citizen groups to press local authority leaders to pass motions in favour of introducing an LCA. The tactics of citizen groups varied widely, from conventional methods like petitions through to disruptive tactics like blocking roads. Whilst confrontational citizen tactics drew criticism, they created an atmosphere of pressure, which climate-minded representatives were able to take advantage of by arguing for the need to respond by implementing climate action plans, including LCAs. Many climate-minded representatives had been advocating for bold climate policy for years, often unsuccessfully, and saw an opportunity to advance the agenda they had faced barriers in lobbying for. Some pre-empted that setting up a LCA would give the green light to specific policies they wanted to see and which they had not been able to pass as elected representatives due to the lack of political pressure. As Wells et al. (2021) argue, in effect, this meant that some LCAs led to 'the introduction of pre-planned or pre-existing policies rather than a direct impact by truly being citizen-centred policy making processes or conducive to new climate policy' (p. 4). We can add the role that local authority officers sometimes assumed. Some had been quietly building support for a LCA with officer colleagues and elected representatives; this

³ Through research publications like the 2018 IPCC report, scientists provided a knowledge base for understanding the severity of climate crisis. This was a very important factor in the LCAs wave.

contributed to generating an environment of support for LCAs within council bureaucracies, which in turn facilitated their eventual adoption.⁴

In other contexts, however, there was little buy-in for LCAs from ‘within’ (from Council officers and representatives), and motions in favour of introducing LCAs seem to have been generated almost uniquely by intense pressure from ‘outside’ (lobbying by citizen groups). Some local authority leaders failed to make a clear commitment about the extent to which they intended to implement LCA recommendations — their decision to run a LCA represented a capitulation to citizen demands, rather than a genuine belief in the transformative potential of LCAs (Bryant & Stone 2020; Willis et al. 2022). The fact that motion templates committing to a LCA appear to have been passed between councils — sometimes with only minor modification made to motions before they were passed — is evidence that this appears to have happened in a number of cases; decisions were made in haste, rather than carefully thought through (Howarth et al. 2021).

These are just two examples of the way political forces pressed for LCAs. Other examples could be given, and other groups of actors that we have not included in the diagram could be added to it to add further layers of complexity.⁵ The advantage of Fig. 2 is that it provides an account of the way messy, political dynamics underpinned the origins of the LCA wave, thus problematising the simple narrative in Fig. 1.

3.2 The aftermath of LCAs

Readers can now track back to Fig. 2. The flow chart moves to a decision point on the top right-hand corner with the following question: ‘[Are] net zero policies adopted?’ It then splits into two potential outcomes — ‘yes’ or ‘no’. In the short term, local authorities are unlikely to adopt wholesale the policies recommended by LCAs, for two reasons.

First, local authorities across the UK face a shortage of statutory powers and funding (c.f. Howarth et al. 2021). Thus, even local authorities with strong political buy-in for transformative climate action are likely to face considerable difficulties in implementing change. This begs the question “why did Local Authority (LA) leaders commit to running LCAs, if they knew they lacked the power to meaningfully take forward LCA recommendations?” In our experience, one reason is that some LA leaders wanted to develop an evidence-base to lobby central government for the decentralisation of powers and resources. They saw in LCAs an opportunity to use them tactically to make the case to government that there is both (a) local appetite for transformative climate action, and that (b) LAs, as custodians of a given area, are well placed to deliver that change.

This tactical move has the potential to generate two outcomes, illustrated in Fig. 2. One is that government responds positively, devolving powers and resources that facilitate the adoption of net zero policies. The other is that national government ignores such calls. If the latter were to transpire, the failure to empower LAs to enact LCA recommendations could generate a backlash — citizens would find themselves in the position of having had their expectations raised, only to find those hopes dashed, thus generating an increase in

⁴ Two of the authors were until recently local authority councillors. This is a phenomenon we have observed in our roles.

⁵ For example, LCAs were sometimes instigated by local climate commissions. In these instances, they were less likely to be interpreted by non-state actors as a cover for advancing local authority political objectives or interests. Thus, the fact that these were started by local climate commissions was not purely procedural, as might be imagined, but instead had political implications.

citizen apathy or, conversely, leading to citizen discontent and protest. Thus, in Fig. 2, we have looped this potential outcome back to an increase in fractious climate politics — this is a ‘feedback loop’ as it returns to the environment within which many LCAs emerged. More widely, if citizens feel let down by politicians, heat in the political system may well rise further. From this vantage point, the failure to live up to LCA expectations could contribute to increasingly fraught political dynamics.

There is a second reason we believe LAs are unlikely to adopt net zero policies in the short term. We have already stated that some LAs were pressed into running LCAs without thinking through how they intended to use LCA recommendations (Bryant & Stone 2020). Lack of commitment to fully working through the implications of running a LCA may lead to rather timid climate action and policymaking, in turn feeding back into citizen discontent and/or citizen apathy.

The final loop in our diagram shows the compromise some local authorities attempted to make. Wary of their limited powers and funding, some asked citizens to deliberate only on recommendations that the LA felt it could meaningfully implement — for example, in relation to waste policy or planning, both areas that lie within the remit of local authorities. Even in these instances, feedback loops still exist. LAs which opted for this course risked coming under pressure to widen the remit of LCAs among groups who felt they were being under-ambitious.

We can see then that the aftermath of LCAs does not escape the messy dynamics that the origins of the LCAs wave were enmeshed within. As with the origins of the LCAs wave, there are additional scenarios and factors which we have not included which could be added to Fig. 2 to add further layers of complexity.

4 Implications

In contrasting the convenient fiction of LCAs with the messy realities, we are not suggesting that political actors are ignorant of the messiness. Our argument is that the convenient fiction is a common narrative used to explain the rationale for running LCAs, not necessarily a common cognitive frame. Political actors are often very aware of the messiness of political decision-making and are skilled in navigating it. Neither is this argument new — more generally, political scientists have long analysed the complicated ways in which policies and strategies emerge from governing institutions (see, for example, John Kingdon’s (2011) much-cited ‘multiple streams’ model and Yuille et al.’s (2021) description of how local decision-makers navigate their institutions). Building on this scholarship, we suggest some advantages to being more explicit about the messiness of LCAs. We are not suggesting that political actors should always be explicit about this messiness, but that in some circumstances, being upfront about the mess, complexity and opportunity involved in LCAs would be helpful. Below, we outline three reasons accompanied by examples of tactical communications.

4.1 Expectation management

Within the linear framing, success for a LCA is usually considered to require direct policy change or, at least, changes in the thinking of key decision makers. The implied ‘end point’ in the process also suggests an objective point in time from which one can judge an LCA to be a success or a failure. This places an undue burden on LCAs to ‘prove their worth’, often within a relatively short time of reporting on their findings, making it easy for detractors to attack LCAs as ineffective, and for perceived failures to feed into apathy and dissatisfaction amongst LCA proponents and participants.

Understanding the messy political processes leading up to and surrounding LCAs helps clarify that they cannot side-step the complexity of political decision making. The messy frame surfaces barriers that may be faced both internally and externally as local authorities seek to act on LCA findings. In so doing, it can help those involved in LCAs to understand them as part of an on-going and open-ended process of political change, rather than a discrete intervention with a definite pre-determined outcome.

How might local authority actors deploy this appreciation to achieve specific tactical goals? One way is for council representatives to proactively point to the external barriers that they will face in implementing LCA recommendations to citizens who pressed for LCAs and members of the LCA. They might explain that they intend to use LCA recommendations to lobby for the devolution of power and resources, whilst committing to doing what they can to implement recommendations within their control. This would help to manage expectations, thus minimising (although as we have established not entirely avoiding) negative feedback loops.

4.2 Broader understanding of LCA impacts

As well as highlighting the difficulty of enacting change, the messy model helps to surface different ways in which LCAs can generate impact. Individual LCAs, or the wider popularity of LCAs, could contribute towards political pressure to devolve more power and resources to the local level. Such impacts could materialise even if specific LCA recommendations are not immediately acted upon. This might help increase support for LCAs among LA actors who were previously sceptical of them. This in turn might help build political support for running other deliberative initiatives in the future.

Impact assessment frameworks for citizens' assemblies have started to take a broader view of the types of impacts they consider and the timeframe over which they might materialise (Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies 2022). Our messy model, or detailed context-specific versions of this, could help to identify impact pathways and contribute to better impact assessment frameworks.

4.3 Help actors to orientate within the process

Understanding LCAs as part of a messy and constantly unfolding political process can help different actors to orientate themselves regarding the assembly/jury and its aftermath. We would encourage citizens, local authority actors and other relevant groups to use Fig. 2 to help improve their practice, thereby drawing out the productive political uses to which LCAs might be put in advancing climate goals.

The diagram and the argument we have presented clarify that LCAs are not just a source of policy ideas, but a potential tool for overcoming feelings of civic apathy, or increasingly fractious politics. This understanding may influence how council officers and representatives interpret and communicate the process and plan follow up work that builds on good will generated through LCAs. For example, local authority actors could use the diagram to identify points in time when they could design further interventions to advance net zero political objectives, like rolling out new citizen engagement activities to build support for new funding arrangements for specific decarbonisation activities.

Actors outside of councils campaigning for LCAs might use this analysis to gain a better understanding of the barriers officers and representatives face and the political battles and calculations involved in acting on recommendations. This more nuanced understanding may help in the process of relationship and coalition building that is central to any political change.

Finally, there would be merit in a more systematic academic analysis than we have provided in this essay, of the ways in which political actors navigate the LCA process. This could, for example, involve researchers working alongside political actors (be it local authority representatives or citizens) at each stage of a LCA process to map the dynamics and tensions, and to encourage reflection on the part of practitioners.

5 Conclusion

The recent wave of LCAs has been a significant development in local climate politics, as part of a wider trend in the use of deliberative processes aimed at deepening democratic engagement for climate action (Willis et al. 2022). However, we argue that if LCAs are justified using too simplistic or linear an account of change — what we call a convenient fiction — then there is a danger that their contribution will be dismissed. They will have been set up to fail. Instead, we argue that LCAs do not transcend local politics, but are themselves an intervention in a messy, political reality. Their impact should not just be judged against the question of whether policies recommended by LCAs were adopted, but against the wider question of whether they contribute to an emboldened local climate politics able to enact the ambitious changes necessary to meet climate goals. In addition, as we have argued, there are tactical advantages of understanding the messiness of LCAs, which involves better communicating their potential to a range of stakeholders (from citizens to internal local authority actors) as well as identifying new pathways for advancing net zero goals at the local level.

Appendix

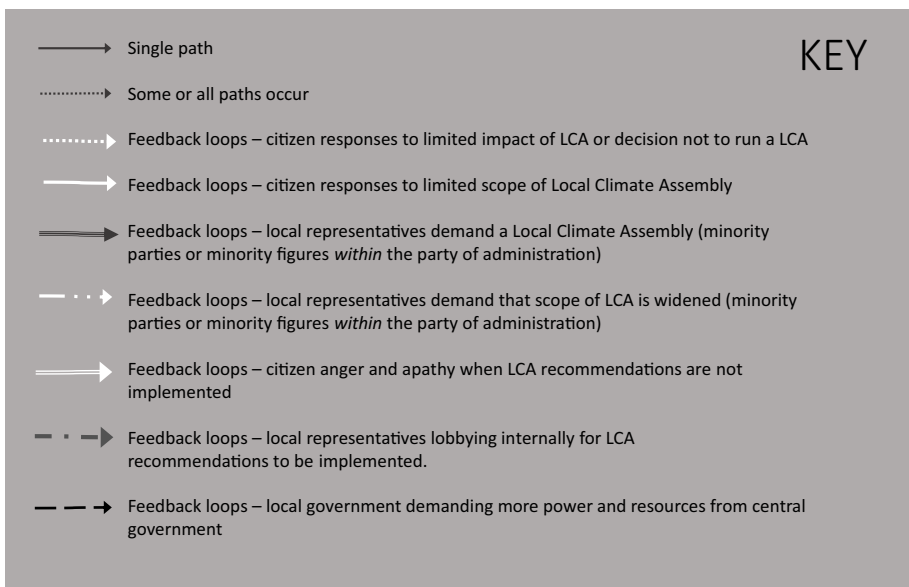


Fig. 3 Appendix: Figure key

Author contribution The article is the product of conversations between all four authors. Pancho Lewis is the lead author and wrote most of the article's content; Jacob Ainscough led on the 'Implications' section and final edits; Rachel Coxcoon led on designing the diagrams; Rebecca Willis edited the final version and helped structure the overall argument.

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Data availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors have no relevant financial interests to disclose. As actors involved in local authority politics in different capacities, we have a non-financial interest insofar as we have in varying ways been involved with local climate assembly projects and have a personal belief in their utility. Rebecca Willis and Rachel Coxcoon have appeared as expert speakers at local climate juries. Pancho Lewis, Jacob Ainscough, and Rachel Coxcoon have sat on local climate assembly oversight panels. No payment was received for these roles.

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