

# Media release

## 31.08.16

Royal  
Geographical  
Society

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## ● UK local approach to climate adaptation ‘reactive’ and potentially unequipped to deal with future climate impacts

●●● **UK local approaches to climate adaptation are currently more reactive than proactive, severely affecting local capacity to plan for future climate impacts, according to research presented today at the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Annual International Conference.**

The study, completed by Dr Andrew Kythreotis (Cardiff University), Dr Theresa Mercer (Cranfield University), Professor Paul Milbourne (Cardiff University) and Professor Terry Marsden (Cardiff University), examined how transformative adaptation to climate change – as framed at the international level by the IPCC – is being approached by local policy makers in the UK.

Transformative adaptation recognises that fundamental changes within and across systems are needed to properly respond to the future impacts of climate change.

The study, which was funded by the Regional Studies Association, found that the way transformative adaptation is framed for policy makers by the IPCC does not reflect the practical realities of local adaptation discourse in the UK. UK local adaptation discourses were found to be characterised by a subsuming of adaptation planning into a ‘resilience’ framework that prioritised growth.


“By focusing on resilience, local authorities in the UK have been able to capture a wider network of stakeholders at the local level, including local businesses. However, the upshot of this is that local adaptation responses have tended to be framed within more immediate local priorities like economic growth and development and short-term responses to climate impacts. This has resulted in local climate adaptation responses being reactive rather than proactive, severely reducing local capacity to plan for future long-term climate impacts.

“In UK national policy frameworks adaptation needs to be framed within a different model to ‘growth’ to avoid transformative adaptation being solely viewed locally as an opportunity for economic development,” said Dr Kythreotis, the study’s Principal Investigator.

The study’s findings were based on interviews with policy and governance stakeholders working on climate adaptation issues across a number of UK cities in devolved regions (Glasgow, Hull, Cardiff, Edinburgh, York, Leeds and London) during the summer of 2014.

Further headline recommendations from the research include:

- National statutory frameworks (e.g. The Climate Change Act 2008 and the Localism Act 2011) need to go even further in providing a stronger local regulatory framework for local climate adaptation in the long-term. Currently, in terms of adaptation long-term planning, they only provide the opportunity for local authorities to make changes rather than statutorily obliging them to.

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- To ensure a transformative approach to climate adaptation as framed by the IPCC, responsibility for climate change at the national government level should come from a single department, not one department looking after mitigation and energy and another looking after adaptation. Adaptation and mitigation are not mutually exclusive.
  - Local approaches to climate change adaptation should not just involve throwing money into large scale infrastructure problems (i.e. large scale hard engineered flood defences) as a reactive adaptation response. Expenditure needs to be more closely aligned to local socio-political and environmental contexts, so that when climate-related impacts like floods do occur, communities are better prepared to limit potential damage.
  - The way in which climate change science is translated into policy needs to ensure wider appreciation of different academic disciplines and not just promote physical and technical fixed responses (e.g. The Kyoto Protocol relies on specific technical knowledge to arbitrarily limit global temperatures) that can delimit transformative change.

“UK legislation, like the Climate Change Act 2008 and the Localism Act 2011, has come a long way in giving local authorities greater freedoms to promote increased action on climate adaptation. However, the results of this research demonstrate that more needs to be done by central government to ensure that adaptation is not side-lined in favour of lowering carbon emissions and greater energy security – adaptation is now an important local policy reality in its own right, as the last decade has shown.

“Legislation also needs to ensure that local authorities can statutorily plan for longer term climate impacts and not just react to impacts as they happen. For local transformative adaptation to become a practical reality, there is a requirement for scientists, government, policy makers and local communities to work more closely with one another in developing locally specific adaptation frameworks. Such frameworks need to take into account local social, political and environmental knowledge contexts, in addition to globally-framed established scientific evidence on climate change, in terms of future climate planning in our communities,” said Dr Kythreotis.

ENDS

**Notes to editors:**

1. For further media enquiries, including interview requests, please contact the RGS-IBG's Communications and Media Officer, Scott Edwards, at [s.edwards@rgs.org](mailto:s.edwards@rgs.org) or 020 7591 3019.

2. Dr Andrew Kythreotis' presentation ('Problematizing the multi-scalar governance of climate adaptation: From science-policy expectation framing of transformation at the international scale to policy-reality implementation of resilience at the local scale') is taking place on Wednesday 31 August at the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Annual International Conference. The conference is being held at the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) in London, August 30 – 2 September 2016. It is the largest geography conference in Europe, with more than 400 sessions and 1,500 papers being presented. Full details on the RGS-IBG Annual International Conference 2016 can be found at [www.rgs.org/AC2016](http://www.rgs.org/AC2016)

3. The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) is the learned society and professional body for geography. Formed in 1830 for 'the advancement of geographical science', today we deliver this objective through developing, supporting and promoting geographical research, expeditions and fieldwork, education, public engagement, and geography input to policy. We aim to foster an understanding and informed enjoyment of our world. We hold the world's largest private geographical collection and provide public access to it. We have a thriving Fellowship and membership and offer the professional accreditation 'Chartered Geographer' [www.rgs.org](http://www.rgs.org)