



The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution

28th report of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution:

Adapting institutions to climate change

News Release: embargoed until 00:01 TUESDAY 30 MARCH 2010.

Royal Commission proposes a new 'Climate Adaptation Test' for all new policies

All new programmes and policies should be subject to a new 'Climate Adaptation Test' to ensure faster adaptation to climate change according to the latest report by the influential *Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution* (RCEP)ⁱ, published today.

In its latest report, *Adapting institutions to climate change*, the Commission explores how institutions should adapt their policies to a changing climateⁱⁱ and offers a ten point check list to be followed by all organisations. They found many institutions are poorly prepared to adapt to climate changeⁱⁱⁱ and many have simply not started to consider it. The Commission makes recommendations designed to help institutions develop their capacity to respond to this challenge.

Sir John Lawton, Chair of the Commission, said:

"The scale of the challenge of living with a changing climate has not been sufficiently widely recognised. The Government and the Devolved Administrations have put in place programmes to begin to develop adaptation responses - which is very welcome. But more needs to be done. Some current policies and programmes will not be sustainable in a world where the weather is more extreme."

"Preparing for climate change is particularly difficult, because while there is no doubt that weather patterns are changing and will change further, there is great uncertainty about precisely how far and how fast those changes will be and the local effects. It is a real challenge for institutions to understand how they should prepare, made more difficult by complex governance structures."

"Our report aims to help organisations face these challenges. We have recommended a new duty on public bodies and an adaptation test to be applied to new policies and programmes, and want to ensure we have the skills and knowledge to prepare."

The overwhelming scientific consensus is that the earth is warming because of human activities. Adaptation will be necessary even if mitigation efforts are

markedly increased, because we are already locked in to climate change as a result of historic greenhouse gas emissions. Projections show that it is likely that global average temperatures will rise by 2°C, and there is the potential for a 4°C rise by the end of the century. UK projections suggest warmer, drier summers and warmer wetter winters. The consequences are likely to be profound, even devastating with more extreme events – floods, drought and heat waves – coupled with sea level rises.

The Commission recognise the uncertainty in the range of possible future climates, particularly at the local level. But it is clear that the implications will be significant and institutions need to recognise and deal with this uncertainty. As set out in the report, policies and practice on water management, coast protection, and nature conservation will need to change: maintaining the *status quo* will be increasingly difficult and in some cases ultimately impossible^{iv}.

The Commission found there are often multilayered and complex institutional arrangements in place for managing issues which will be affected by climate change^v. The first, and most significant challenge, is to understand how to “frame” the issue, given the uncertainty and complexity of future climates.

The Commission recommendations aim to ensure that adaptation is embedded in policy making and investment appraisal, in particular through an ‘adaptation test’^{vi} and new duties on public bodies^{vii}. The Commission have prepared a check list of ten questions to help the many institutions who have not yet begun considering what adaptation means to them^{viii}. The Commission believe the Adaptation Sub-Committee^{ix} will have an important role in taking forward several of its recommendations.

The impacts of climate change will be felt more acutely in some places rather than others. Coastal communities for example may face a greater risk of erosion as sea level rises and storms become more frequent. In extreme cases, homes may be lost. This raises some difficult challenges: should government compensate those who lose their homes to the sea? The Commission concluded that, at present, it would be premature to make recommendations in respect of compensation. Sir John said:

“The nation’s practice on compensation is not consistent: we expect and are entitled to compensation for some circumstances, but not for others. There is therefore no general principle which can be easily applied to the case of coastal erosion. And it’s not just an issue of the loss of properties – the loss of businesses, of services, of jobs, and of the sense of community itself are also important. We have therefore recommended that the Adaptation Sub-Committee should address this issue, which needs to be the subject of a wider debate.”

In contrast to climate change mitigation (where local actions have global benefits), adaptation is primarily about local action with local consequences that may differ markedly in different parts of the UK. The Commission therefore recommend that Government initiate a debate on what adaptation means for specific groups of people in different parts of the country.

ⁱ **The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution** (RCEP) is an independent standing body established in 1970 to advise the Queen, the Government, Parliament and the public on environmental issues. Although funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, it is independent of Government departments. Its Chairman is Sir John Lawton CBE FRS, who was previously Chief Executive of the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

ⁱⁱ By 'institution' the Commission means organisations, practical arrangements for implementing policies, or legal and regulatory frameworks.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are some good examples of institutions who are seriously considering how they will adapt to climate change. Since the Commission began its study the Climate Change Act 2008 and the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 have been introduced, and the Adaptation Sub-Committee of the Committee on Climate Change has been created. Another example is the Environment Agency's Thames Estuary 2100 project which is developing a long-term tidal flood risk management plan for London and the Thames estuary.

^{iv} Maintaining the status quo will be a particular problem for protected areas (nature reserves) which are traditionally defined by the groups of species that occupy them. With climate change, their complement of species will also change. Statutory and voluntary conservation organisations will need to recognise this inevitability and plan to 'make space for nature', rather than rigidly defending particular species.

^v For example, complexity in the management of the coastal zone was clearly demonstrated in an audit of coastal activity in the east of England undertaken by CoastNet which found a wide range of stakeholders in possession of five sets of overlapping plans, 14 designations of coastal sites and landscapes, a mix of management bodies, many organisational cultures, uncoordinated organisational activity at different scales, and overlapping jurisdictions, responsibilities and functions. Besides three central Government departments there were four regional bodies, five statutory agencies, four ad hoc groupings, 17 local authorities and five forums which all shared an interest in coastline planning in the region.

^{vi} The 'adaptation test' should be appropriate to the circumstances and integrated into public and private decision making. The objective of the test should be to reduce exposure to the risk of damage through climate change; to develop the capacity to cope with unavoidable damages; and to encourage organisations to take advantage of new opportunities.

^{vii} The Commission recommend the Climate Change Act 2008 should be amended to impose a duty on public bodies of the kind included in the Scottish Climate Change Act or the Greater London Authority Act to address climate change adaptation.

^{viii} The ten questions on adaptation are given in annex 1.

^{ix} The **Adaptation Sub-Committee** (ASC) of the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) was established under the Climate Change Act 2008. The role of the ASC is 'to provide expert advice and scrutiny through the CCC to ensure that the Government's programme for adaptation enables the UK to prepare effectively for the impacts of climate change.' It is chaired by Lord John Krebs Kt FRS.

Annex 1 - Ten questions on adaptation

Although there is no blueprint for adaptation and responses will be specific to local circumstances, for those organisation who have not yet begun to think about what adaptation means for them the Commission suggest ten pertinent adaptation questions:

1. Have you identified the possible range of impacts of climate change on the activities and responsibilities of your institutions or business, and their timescales?
2. Do you understand the nature of, and the limitation in, the climate projections in UKCP09?
3. Do you understand that adaptation to climate change is an open-ended process, not a single action that will solve your problems or reduce your risks?
4. Have you framed the questions and issues to be addressed adequately, so as to avoid tackling the wrong problem, or making matters worse? Do you understand how the risks posed by climate change interact with, and might change, the other risks your organisation has to respond to?
5. Have you identified options for adaptation, and devised flexible plans and strategies that can deal with uncertainty?
6. Are you embedding consideration of adaptation into your core business? Is there the right accountability for actions at the most senior levels of your organisation?
7. Are the objectives and aims of your institutions fit for purpose in a changing world? Are you aware of the powers and duties affecting your institution?
8. Who are the significant other stakeholders (including members of the public) with whom you need to interact to deliver adaptation? Are there barriers (perceived or real) that might make collaboration difficult? How do you plan to negotiate these barriers?
9. Do you have mechanisms in place to listen and respond to alternative views on the ways of dealing with climate change, new ways of thinking, and ways of evaluating the success of past actions in relation to climate change?
10. Do your organisation's planning and investment cycles allow for new insights and information about climate change to be taken into account?