Localising and decentralising goal-based governance for sustainability in England: Policy summary

British Academy: Shared understandings of a sustainable future

Contact

Professor Jane Wills: j.wills2@exeter.ac.uk
Dr Rachel Turner: r.turner@exeter.ac.uk
Claire Collins: Claire.Collins@ioz.ac.uk
Elliot Honeybun-Arnola: e.c.d.honeybun-arnolda@exeter.ac.uk

Localising and decentralising goal-based governance for sustainability in England

In the wake of COP26 held in Glasgow in November 2020, there is increased global urgency and momentum to create more sustainable futures. The transition to net-zero is central to these ambitions, yet existing national policies and strategies are often ineffective and poorly integrated with other aspects of sustainable development. One way to better support sustainability transitions is through broader approaches that mobilise diverse actors in collective deliberation and action to realise locally appropriate change. Our research explored the extent to which English local authorities can play a role in leading such goal-based governance at the sub-national scale.

Existing research and action on goal-based governance has focused on the global scale, for example, in relation to mobilisation around the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. However, there is growing recognition of the need for similar leadership and mobilisation at the sub-national scale. In England, local authorities are the only representative bodies with the political authority to lead concerted, place-based action on sustainability but to do this, they need to build broad coalitions for change. This represents a significant shift in the culture, role and practice of local authorities. In addition, civil society organisations are often wary of working with statutory bodies that are perceived to be risk-averse, bureaucratic, slow and top-down. Through a collaborative action research project in Cornwall, a county with strong ambitions to realise net-zero and foster sustainable development (Box 1), we sought to examine the opportunities and challenges of localising goal-based governance for sustainability. Our project generated new knowledge and insights into the implementation and impact of localised goal-based governance, with important implications for policy and practice in other parts of the country.

Box 1: Cornwall's leadership in goal-based governance for sustainability

Our project focused on the opportunities and challenges of coalition building for goal-based governance in one local authority jurisdiction in England (Cornwall). In December 2020, the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Leadership Board (CIOSLB) committed to work together to deliver The Cornwall Plan and formally review progress each year.[1] The Cornwall Plan identifies six transitions to ensure that Cornwall is a fairer, greener and more resilient place by 2050. A key element of the vision is a recognition that no single organisation can deliver these outcomes alone, and all the partners represented on the CIOSLB have committed to support the cross-cutting outcomes of the Cornwall Plan through a shared ethos of

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[1] The CIOS Leadership Board brings together the elected leaders and executive officers of the key statutory organisations in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. They work together in a formal capacity to progress and address challenges facing the region. Their membership comprises Leader of Cornwall Council (Chair), Deputy Leader of Cornwall Council, * Chairman of the Council of the Isles of Scilly ,* Vice-Chairman of the Council of the Isles of Scilly,* Leader of the largest opposition group on Cornwall Council,* Devon and Cornwall Police and Crime Commissioner, * Representation of Cornwall's Members of Parliament (x 1), * Chair of Cornwall's Association of Local Councils, * Chair of the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Local Enterprise Partnership, Chair of the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Local Nature Partnership, Cornwall Council Portfolio holder for Adults as the representative of the Cornwall Health and Wellbeing Board, * Deputy Chair of Kernow Clinical Commissioning Group, President of the Chamber of Commerce, Independent Chair of the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health and Care Partnership Senate (* denotes they are democratically elected).

'Together We Can'. Welcoming the G7 summit to Cornwall in June 2021 reflected and further reinforced these local ambitions to be the 'first net zero region' in the UK. The Cornwall Plan is the agreed vision of a more sustainable future and local leaders recognise the need to regularly review progress in realising the goals laid out in the plan.

An action research experiment to realise localised goal-based governance for sustainability in Cornwall, England

With statutory bodies in Cornwall having published a vision to lead Cornwall to a more sustainable future by 2050, our project explored the extent to which they could engage in deeper partnership working and foster new relationships with each other as well as with civic and civil society organisations. Our research comprised two strands of activity.

First, 23 in-depth interviews with local leaders from the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Leadership Board (CIOSLB) were analysed to review the collaborative action that had been taken to deliver the Cornwall Plan. Following this analysis, key findings for future work to enable the success of the Cornwall Plan were identified and shared at a workshop attended by 27 participants from the CIOSLB. This workshop explored how to develop successful partnerships and action for delivery of the plan (Figures 1 and 2). The workshop was recorded and data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify priorities for action. This highlighted the need to engage wider civil society with the plan and stimulated the creation of a second workshop entitled the 'Civic Lantern'. This second workshop was designed to engage civic and civil society leaders in the plan and its delivery as well as to collectively prioritise two goals that could be widely adopted and advanced by scaling up action during the year. This workshop was informed by a preliminary survey which collected data on ideas and action already being taken to realise greater socio-ecological sustainability in Cornwall. This event experimented with how to engage local leaders in realising the vision of the Cornwall Plan (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 1: The task at hand for the first workshop, January 2022. Illustration by Keith Sparrow
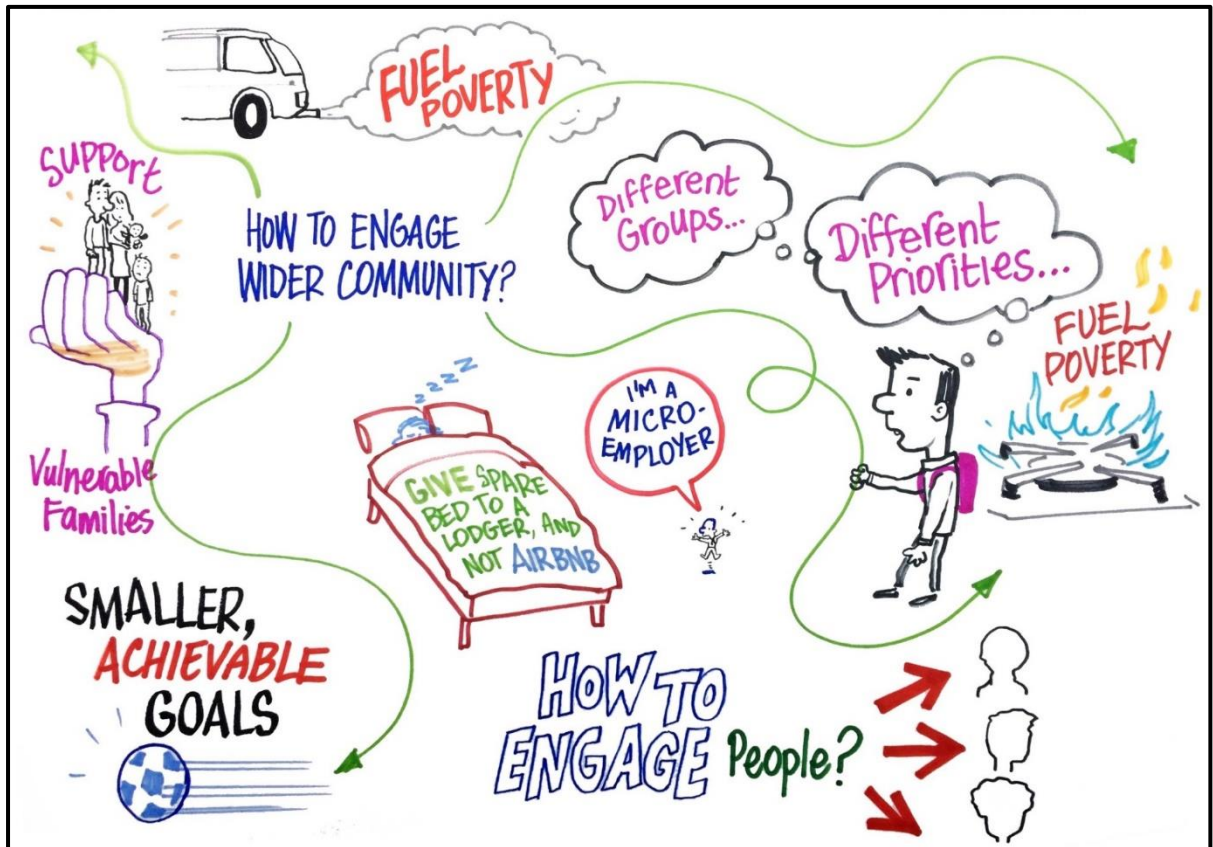

Figure 2: Questions emerging from first workshop, January 2022. Illustration by Keith Sparrow
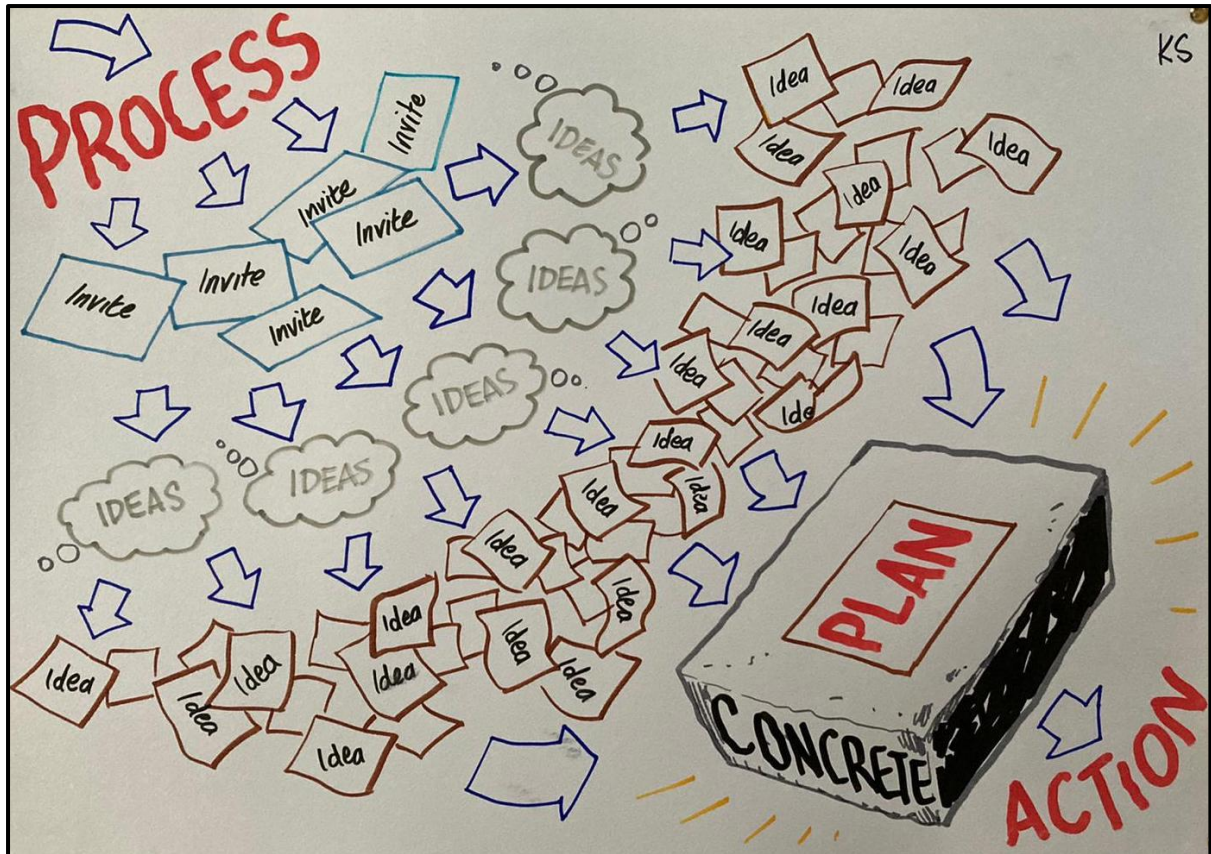
Figure 3: The process behind and delivered by the Civic Lantern. Illustration by Keith Sparrow

Figure 4: The final two goals prioritise at the Civic Lantern. Illustration by Keith Sparrow

Key research findings and implications

Our research highlighted a number of factors, processes and practices that are critically important in the further development of localised goal-based governance in England.

Structures for organisational collaboration are critical to facilitating the development of good working relationships and the identification of shared goals. We found that the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Leadership Board (CIOSLB) provided an institutional mechanism for diverse partners to foster relationships and find sufficient common ground to agree the vision outlined in the Cornwall Plan. Furthermore, this institutional infrastructure provided the resources and momentum to support an initial Annual Review to check the progress of the plan, to identify ways of better working together, and to broaden the range of organisations involved in realising the vision laid out in the plan.

A clear strategic vision can help align different organisations around agreed goals. In our example, the Cornwall Plan provided a shared vision to which a very wide range of organisations were able to align themselves, facilitating a sense of common mission with the potential to develop collaborative action for change. These organisations included statutory organisations such as local authorities and the National Health Service, as well as town and parish councils, and local community groups.

Aligning the strategic vision with an existing regional identity, sense of place and established connections can further reinforce the momentum for change. Cornish statutory, civic and civil society organisations reflect long-standing commitments to cultural and ecological sustainability. There is well-established support for cultural activity that helps to sustain local communities and there is strong support for local activism to protect terrestrial and marine environments. Our Civic Lantern event was able to harness the social capital already built around strong affiliations to people, place and environment, and to bring people together around their shared interests. As such, goal-based governance will be more feasible and successful where people are already organised and these social connections can be mobilised and scaled up around existing shared interests.

There are 'nested' goals that are important to consider in mobilising people for change. While the Cornwall Plan provided an ambitious high-level vision for a more sustainable future, our research also highlighted the need to identify short term goals that can engage people in practical action. A grand vision will only lead to change if people can engage with more immediate, short-term goals that contribute to larger scale change. In our case, the vision of the Cornwall Plan was to be delivered through the adoption of short-term goals, as identified and prioritised as part of the Annual Review. These short-term goals were selected on the basis of their appeal to a broad range of organisations and actors, as well as their potential impact in delivering change.

Effective goal-based governance needs to incorporate a very wide range of organisations, across sectors, silos and scales. Our research found that a shared vision of socio-ecological sustainability, as laid out in the Cornwall Plan, appealed to a very diverse range of statutory bodies, civic and civil society organisations. However, supporting the plan is easier than delivering change, and our project highlighted the importance of engaging civic and civil society organisations in effective goal-based governance. This will ensure that the

vision and goals are widely shared and that the lead organisations are in active partnership with the local groups that drive and deliver change on the ground. Our research indicates that there are opportunities to learn from local innovation, to identify which initiatives could be scaled up to have bigger effect, and to find inter-organisational synergies to better support effective action and change.

Delivering goal-based governance depends on harnessing the complementary roles of different organisations. We found that it was relatively easy for a wide range of organisations to endorse a shared vision for sustainability, but the research also highlighted the value of different organisations working together. Effective goal-based governance demands scaling up innovative local action to realise wider-scale change. In our case, the Civic Lantern event identified a top goal as supporting local sustainable community growing schemes across Cornwall. There were civil society leaders who were already doing this work who could pitch it as a successful activity, and the CIOSLB then offered to help unlock the land and resources to scale up the idea across Cornwall. Operating across organisational sectors, silos and scales exposes the complementary roles of different actors and, if done sensitively, it can mobilise a wide range of people for change.

Creative and innovative processes can effectively engage people in collective deliberation around shared goals. Our project found that local civic and civil society leaders were willing to join a deliberative forum, in an informal space, to share ideas and deliberate about the goals that could be scaled up for collective action in Cornwall. We organised an event that was appealing, carefully organised and sharply facilitated, with a direct connection to the CIOSLB. The Civic Lantern sought to engage civic and civil society leaders in a way that used their time most effectively, provided a positive learning experience, and made a direct connection to the CIOSLB who could receive the top goals, and follow up afterwards.

Mobilising local capacity for goal-based governance requires interventions that are differentiated by organisational type. Our project aimed to include both civic and civil society; we were alert to the potential power of incorporating the geographical reach and resources of local councils as well as the energy, innovation and focus of civil society. However, we found that the civic lantern event was more appealing to active civil society organisations than it was to town and parish councillors and clerks. While we worked with the county association of local councils to organise the event, and invited local council leaders, they were less likely to attend. Rolling out localised goal-based governance would require a more differentiated strategy in order to successfully mobilise and realise the power of both civic and civil society.

Effective goal-based governance would also need to incorporate business and the private sector for maximum impact. Galvanising local society for action over shared goals will be most effective when also incorporating private sector interests (such as landowners and developers), businesses (including large multi-national chains as well as small and medium sized enterprises) and influential media organisations and individuals (such as the local press, radio, television channels and social media influencers). When there are agreed goals to which the greatest diversity of people, organisations and interests can align, change will be most effective and thereby motivate further mobilisation around shared goals.

Goal-based governance requires clear lines of responsibility and transparent systems of accountability to clarify what is to happen following a consultation or deliberation event. If people engage and then nothing happens, goal-based governance will not be sustained. It will be all too easy for people and organisations to retreat to business-as-usual. In order to encourage continued collaboration and engagement, local authorities will need to be proactive and responsive to the priorities put forward by civil society. Ongoing engagement will depend on evidence and experience of effective local action and change.

Localising goal-based governance requires substantial top-down support and long-term commitment. Our research highlighted the importance of relationship building between organisational leaders and across scalar hierarchies. Investing in these relationships takes time, energy and attention. It needs to be supported by the senior managers and acculturated into organisational practices. The challenges of crisis-management in the National Health Service in particular, made it difficult for their leaders to fully engage in the Cornwall Plan. Organisational restructuring and staff turnover can also make it difficult to realise long term relationships and planning as demanded by sustainability goals.

The effective engagement, mobilisation and coordination of civic and civil society leaders demands significant resources. Our Civic Lantern event required a full-time organiser and support from a professional facilitator to ensure its success. There were costs incurred in procuring a good venue, providing refreshment and food, and ensuring proper follow up after the event. There are also particular challenges of doing this work in a rural area, as deeper engagement would demand multiplying and decentralising the Civic Lantern to different parts of the county. At present, it is not clear which organisation could play this coordination role in any future annual review of the Cornwall Plan, nor how the funds would be raised to support it. Without the institutional infrastructure to bring organisations together (as has proved so important in relation to the CIOLB and the creation of the Cornwall Plan in the first place), it will be difficult to sustain the broader coalition to deliver the Plan.

Long term research relationships between local authorities and local universities can help to underpin goal-based governance. Our research developed as part of a longer-term partnership between the University of Exeter's Environment and Sustainability Institute and Cornwall's civic leaders. Our team were involved in the research that anticipated the Cornwall Plan and we have subsequently had unprecedented access to learn about the challenges of developing and delivering the Cornwall Plan. In turn, the CIOSLB have been able to draw on the resources of the university team to help them reflect on the routes to better delivering a more sustainable future for Cornwall. There are mutual benefits from embedding research in organisational practice, facilitating reflection for learning.

Effective goal-based governance requires a shift in prevailing cultures and norms about civic engagement. It is notable that a number of the participants at the Civic Lantern highlighted the extent to which a 'culture of dependency' stymies local action for change. They argued that people tend to 'look up' to higher level authority to secure a response to pressing concerns rather than organising themselves. Although Cornwall has a vibrant civic and civil society sector, these broader questions of culture will be pertinent in rolling out goal-based governance for sustainability to other parts of the country. Our research has exposed the importance of having a vibrant and active civil society and civic culture that will be critical to effective goal-based governance for sustainability in other places in future.