

COP 26 and the One Planet Standard – for all our futures



Joan Walley is a non-executive director at North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare NHS Trust. She was MP for Stoke-on-Trent North for 28 years, and spent time as both Shadow Transport and Shadow Environment Minister and Chaired the Environmental Audit Select Committee for five years.

Congratulations to GGI for once again being at the cutting edge with your chosen themes for this year's Festival of Governance. Your sustainability theme couldn't be timelier. With the Countdown on and just days left before the start of the United Nations' Conference of the Parties (COP) 26 in Glasgow on 30 October, all eyes will be focused on the discussions, negotiations and commitments at that event.

It is difficult to convey just how massive this UK-hosted UN summit will be for all our hopes and fears for the future. If it isn't already on your radar, it needs to be.

Future generations the world over – our children and grandchildren – will look back and hold us to account over this one event. Those of us alive today cannot escape the enormity of what is about to be discussed and agreed upon. The outcome matters to all of us.

Having attended previous UN COP summits – notably in Copenhagen – I know how frantic these occasions can be, as world leaders, their officials and civil servants, often working through the night, attempt to reach agreement over a host of complex policy issues.

The bottom line will be whether enough countries sign up for action and commit to the finance that will be ambitious enough to leave us with a realistic chance of restricting future temperature rise to no more than 1.5 degrees.

As I write the outcome is in the balance as we await details of exactly how much countries are prepared to offer as part of their nationally determined contributions (NDCs).

Back at the Copenhagen Summit in 2009, negotiations were on such a knife-edge that at one stage the UK's negotiator deputy prime minister John Prescott came up with the bright idea to 'stop the clock!' The thinking was that, as there was no likelihood of a deal by the end of the conference session, rather than leave without one the clock should be stopped to give delegates time to thrash out their differences.

Regrettably, October's COP 26 delegates don't have that luxury of endless time stretching ahead of them. Neither do we, the people of the planet, have the option of sitting back when it comes to implementing whatever commitments come out of COP 26. Whatever our role, wherever we live, we all have to be ready with detailed, crosscutting and evidence-based action plans to deliver the high-level commitments pledged by global leaders.

This is where Tuesday's launch of the One Planet Standard fits into the jigsaw. 'Made' in Wales, it is one of the offshoots to emerge from the transformational thinking which led to the Senedd's ground-breaking legislation the Well-Being and Future Generations (Wales) Act.

The standard is a much-needed tool to assist organisations to effectively embed actions for sustainability into their own strategic and operational objectives. And it is great that GGI is flagging it up. This is exactly the kind of follow-up action needed for COP 26.

We don't yet have future specific legislation for future generations in the UK, but we do have the UK 2008 Climate Change Act, which established the Climate Change Committee to report to parliament and set out a timescale for carbon budgets as a means of meeting legislative targets for greenhouse gas emissions.

Now that the NHS has responded by setting out its own commitment to getting to zero carbon by 2040, (Delivering a Net Zero Health Service) and for this to apply to the wider procurement activities by 2045 it is finally all systems go.

This means that the current NHS move to a system-wide approach to healthcare delivered through ICSs and ICPs needs to factor in decisions about meeting climate change commitments.

We desperately need guidance and a policy framework to ensure that climate targets are met and the NHS plays its part in delivering on national commitments made at COP 26.

As chair of the NHS Midlands Greener Delivery Board here in the Midlands I am looking forward to helping frame the strategy. How will each ICS embed theirs on carbon budgets? What governance oversight will there be? How will this be managed and communicated across all staff and workplaces? How will it be audited? What will it mean for the provision of services and service users? How much collaboration with partners will be needed? What about skills training? Innovation? What will it mean for waste policy? For food policy? For transport and estates? What role will our wonderful NHS workers have in communicating this shift? What research will help? How will we oversee and measure this transformation? What will it mean for health and wellbeing? Who will lead on this?

At a time of understandable uncertainty, GGI's coverage of these complex issues is a welcome indicator that it will be offering a welcome spotlight on the race to net zero in the challenging months ahead. Its facilitation of dialogue and discussion will be essential as we move to a new understanding of how to tackle the carbon emergency.

