

Sustainable Development in Cornwall

Local Perspectives
on Challenges and
Opportunities



June 2021

Research Summary
and Policy Brief

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Overview

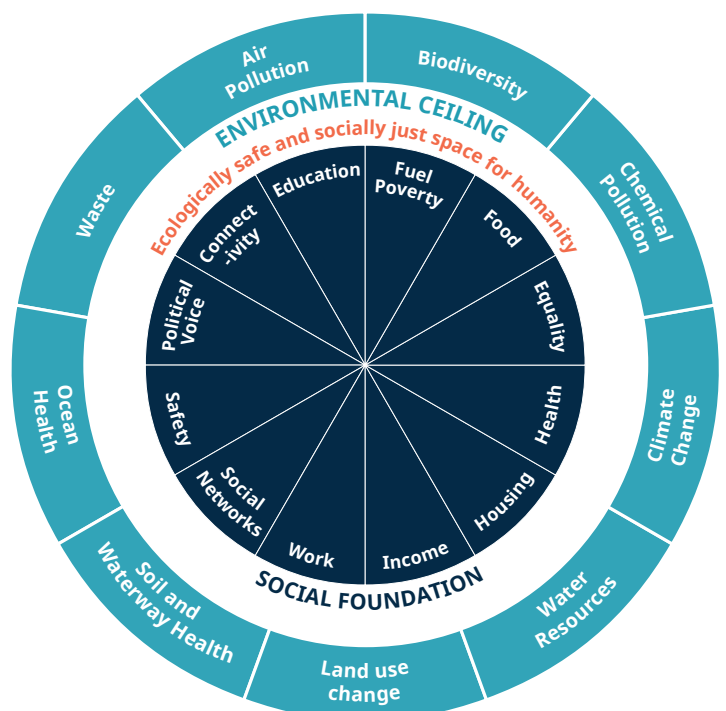
- Doughnut Economics, a framework that visually represents the importance of meeting human basic needs without exhausting planetary resources, is being widely adopted as a tool to promote sustainable development.
- Cornwall Council is the first English local authority to do this, and the framework now underpins *The Cornwall Plan*, committing key stakeholders to improve sustainability outcomes by 2050.
- Geographical analysis shows that the challenges and opportunities for sustainable development vary between localities in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.
- There are also geographical differences in the ambitions and capacity of local councillors and officers to work towards sustainable development, and effective policy will need to reflect these differences in promoting local action.
- Qualitative research shows that community participation in decision making and enhancing support for local action groups can help to fill key capacity gaps in local governance, and there is scope for city, town and parish councils to further mobilise communities to achieve sustainable development outcomes.
- Stronger partnership working between local councils and the unitary authority would improve the complementarity of policies and action at different scales, to create a more sustainable Cornwall.

FIGURE 1 Visualisation of the Doughnut Economics model, showing the social and environmental domains for Cornwall.

Doughnut Economics in Cornwall

Doughnut Economics is a global framework for sustainable development that explores the challenge of meeting human needs without exhausting planetary resources. It represents this challenge visually as the inner ('social foundation') and outer ('ecological ceiling') rings of a doughnut, between which lies an ecologically safe and socially just space for humanity. There is widespread interest in 'downscaling' the Doughnut model to monitor and implement progress towards sustainable development at national, regional and local scales.¹ Recent work that applied the Doughnut Economics model to Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly² established a set of indicators that underpin *The Cornwall Plan 2020-50*³ (Fig. 1). These indicators provide a baseline for understanding the current 'state of the Doughnut', which can be revisited to evaluate progress towards sustainability goals.

This research summary reports on the key findings from a new project that aimed to: provide a more detailed understanding of how sustainability indicators vary across Cornwall; identify sub-regional priorities for enhancing sustainable development; and examine opportunities and constraints to taking action at a local scale. This research supports efforts to develop an inclusive vision, amplifying the voices of local communities in shaping change, and prioritising partnership working to achieve a more sustainable Cornwall. The full report is available [here](#).



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Geographical Analysis of Sustainability Challenges

A geographical breakdown of data underpinning the domains of the Doughnut demonstrates geographical inequalities in sustainable development across Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

Cornwall's geography is diverse, encompassing marine and terrestrial habitats, areas of high wealth alongside high deprivation, and urban and rural environments. This diversity means that social and environmental sustainability challenges and priorities will vary across the county.

Of 33 social and environmental indicators identified in the 'State of the Doughnut' report, available data were identified to map 21 indicators at a sub-county level. Proxy data were used for some of these, due to data gaps, and for the remainder no suitable data were available.

Social and environmental sustainability challenges are experienced differently across the county. Some localities performed correspondingly well (or poorly) on both social and environmental issues, while others performed relatively well in one, compared to the other. The findings illustrate the need to consider local-level experience on a case-by-case basis to ensure that steps towards sustainable development are appropriate to the circumstances and goals of individual communities.

Perspectives of Town, Parish, and City Councils

Questionnaire responses, gathered from representatives of 50 town, parish and city councils across Cornwall, were synthesised to give an overview of perspectives on the priorities, challenges, and opportunities for action related to sustainable development.

City, town and parish councils are well-placed to communicate local needs and connect local voices to county-wide discussions, agendas, and policy decisions. Survey data revealed variations in the perceived sustainability issues and priorities, both social and environmental, across different communities in Cornwall.

Among the key environmental priorities noted were the need to protect land and nature from unsustainable development, and to enhance protection of natural flora and fauna (Fig. 2). Issues identified as important sustainability challenges were not necessarily those most highly prioritised by local councils, often because of a perceived inability to address large-scale issues, such as carbon emissions, at a local level. Concerns about land use and the necessity for sustainably-managed development were raised frequently, belying an inherent conflict between social and environmental demands.

For the social domains, there was high correspondence between the challenges identified and the priorities of local councils, with poverty, transport and connectivity, and affordable housing raised as key issues (Fig. 3). Increased public participation in decision-making was also a common priority across local authorities.



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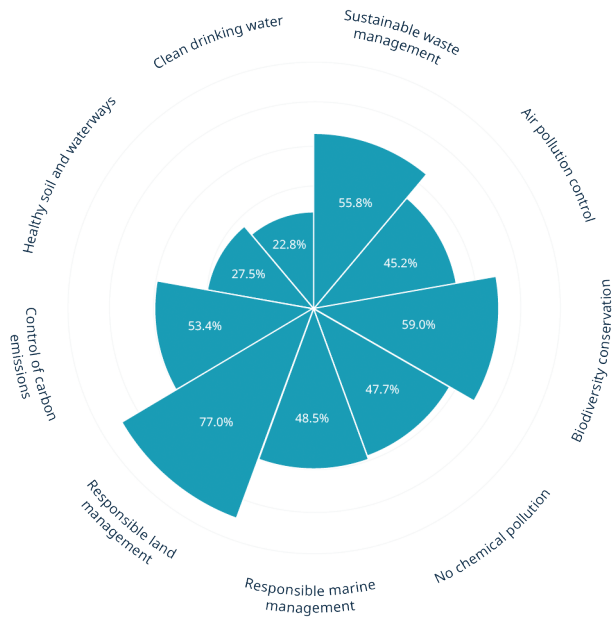


FIGURE 2 Percentage of individual locations (n=50) responding 'high priority' when asked 'How much of a priority for your council is improving these aspects of environmental sustainability?'

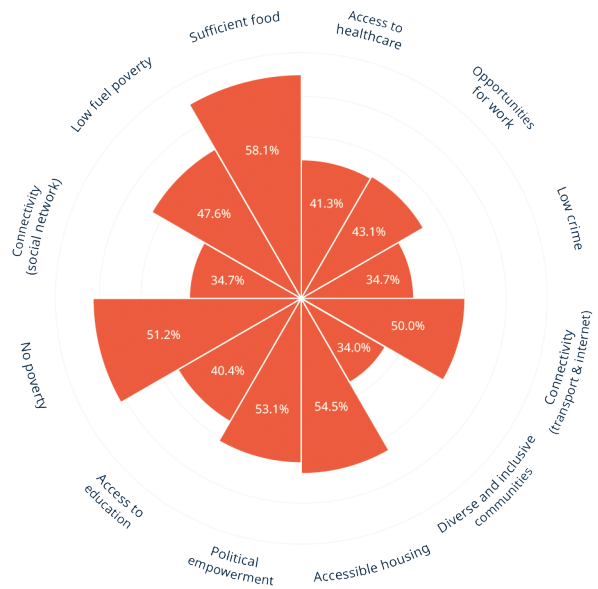


FIGURE 3 Percentage of individual locations (n=50) responding 'high priority' when asked 'How much of a priority for your council is improving these aspects of social sustainability?'

A wide variety of actions are already underway to support sustainable development across the county (Fig. 4). Actions by community groups were noted as examples of positive change working towards improved social wellbeing, particularly in quickly and efficiently meeting emerging needs in food provision and reducing isolation. Respondents noted the critical importance of this activity during the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing social restrictions. Environmentally-oriented activity was also mentioned frequently, with respondents highlighting local efforts to restore biodiversity, take action on climate change, and reduce waste by both community groups and local council-led initiatives.

Despite reporting significant positive action by local councils and community groups, a lack of funding, capacity, and engagement of local communities were perceived as key constraints to making further progress towards addressing social and environmental challenges. Respondents highlighted the need for multi-level governance systems to incorporate an understanding of the needs of local communities and their environments into future decision making and planning for the region.

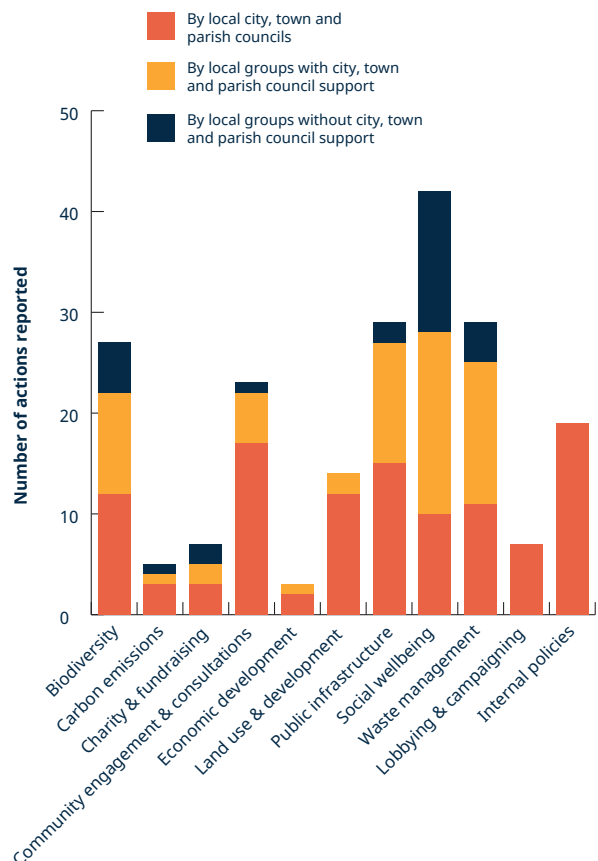


FIGURE 4 Responses to an online survey from across 50 cities, towns, and parishes identified actions already underway to improve sustainability in Cornwall.

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Helston Case Study

Interviews conducted with a diverse group of stakeholders in the town of Helston aimed to understand the extent to which the local council and public stakeholders in that town felt able to drive local-level changes, in order to meet community needs and enhance sustainability.

Priorities for sustainable development identified by stakeholders in Helston largely aligned with the domains underpinning the county-wide Doughnut model. Transport and work were commonly mentioned social issues cited as priorities. Climate change and biodiversity were the most frequently mentioned environmental priorities, with respondents noting significant opportunity for taking local action to address biodiversity loss in particular.

A number of priorities highlighted by interviewees represented cross-cutting issues influencing both social wellbeing and environmental health, such as the decline of the town centre and access to the natural environment. Respondents suggested that, by addressing these areas of concern, local councils would be able to achieve synergistic improvements. Similarly, in regards to transport, respondents noted that improvements to cycling infrastructure would promote 'greener' modes of travel as well as improved connectivity.

Potential barriers to local-level action spanned challenges in communication and decision making, democracy and governance, resources and support, and challenges of geography and scale. Access to funding was cited by all respondents as a core challenge, followed closely by a lack of effective engagement in decision making within the community, particularly around issues where there were conflicting priorities. Opportunities were identified to build community resilience, encourage collective action, and develop more collaborative governance. Interviews also revealed a demand for greater support from central government and higher-tier local authorities, to enable communities to drive local-level action towards sustainable change.

References

1. Raworth, K. (2017) Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist, Penguin Random House, London.
2. Turner, R., Poznansky, F., Smirthwaite, N. et al. (2020) Towards a Sustainable Cornwall: State of the Doughnut, University of Exeter, <http://hdl.handle.net/10871/123909>
3. Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Leadership Board (2020) The Cornwall Plan: 2020-2050. Available at: <https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/xcdhwsmu/the-cornwall-plan-2020-2050.pdf> (accessed May 2021)

Conclusion

Geographical analysis of social and environmental indicators revealed that progress towards key areas of sustainable development in Cornwall is not uniform across the county, and these differences in challenges and opportunities must be acknowledged when allocating resources and making policy decisions. Priorities for sustainable development were largely aligned across city, town and parish councils, and the case study of Helston revealed key cross-cutting issues at the intersection of social and environmental domains. A disconnect between perceived environmental issues and suggested local-level priorities reveal challenges related to complex multi-level governance systems and, in some cases, the scale of the issues faced.

There is clear scope for incorporating a Doughnut Economics framework into planning for sustainable development in Cornwall, provided that nuances in locality and governance structures are accounted for. The diversity of actions underway across town and parish councils provides opportunity for experimentation and learning - to engage local communities, make effective use of existing institutions, and inform the wider development of county-level policies. Improved engagement with local community potential, alongside increased collaborative governance and support for community-led action, could drive progress in realising the vision for sustainable development in Cornwall. It would be through this considered, multi-faceted approach, that local authorities could meet the needs of their communities whilst simultaneously safeguarding the environment.



Photo Credits

Thanks to Climate Helston Action Group and Jim and Gail Collins for the use of their images throughout the policy brief.



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