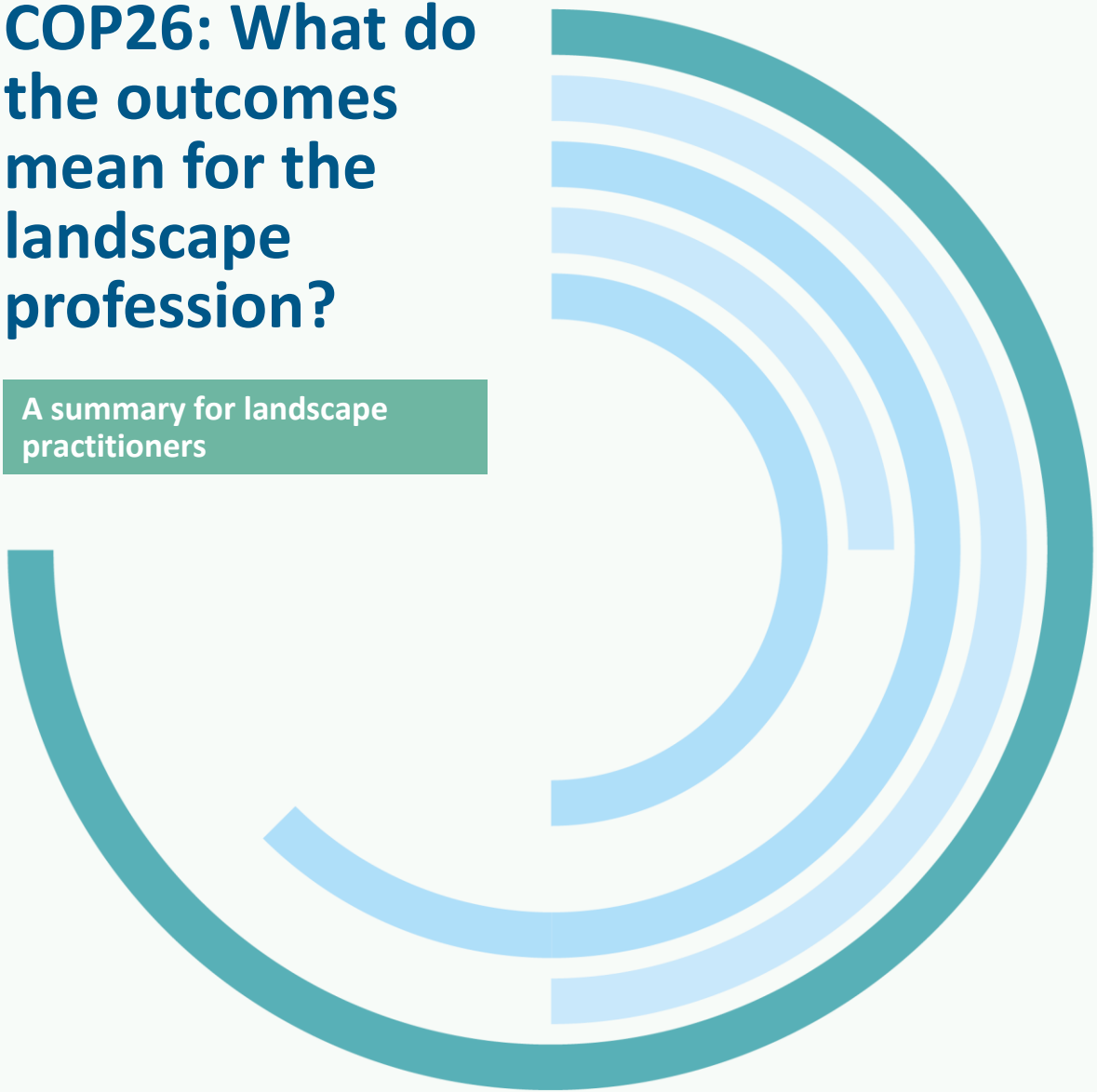


COP26: What do the outcomes mean for the landscape profession?

A summary for landscape practitioners



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Executive summary

There were many announcements during COP26, both during the two-week event in November, and in the months preceding it. These included both international agreements on climate action (the purpose of COP26) and domestic announcements that used the event as a backdrop for other actions on sustainability.

As international environmental professionals, landscape architects will find all COP26 climate announcements of interest. The most relevant, however, are those pertaining to nature-based solutions, climate adaptation, and the role of cities and the built environment.

The headline messages for the UK landscape profession are:

- International commitments take a long time to translate into on-the-ground domestic changes. Eventually, top-level commitments on global warming will require the UK Government to change the way we plan and build our cities, with substantial investment in green development and green skills.
- Major winners at COP26 included electric vehicles, global pledges to cut methane emissions by 30%, some progress on adaptation funds for developing countries, and initiatives to stop deforestation.
- The bulk of the relevant announcements for UK *decarbonisation* were in the government's October 2021 [Net Zero Strategy](#) (subtitled 'Build Back Greener').
- The most relevant parts of this for the UK landscape sector were local transport decarbonisation (including cycling/walking investment) and land use change in the context of nature-based solutions (for example, afforestation).
- The meaningful announcements on climate *adaptation* in the UK – including flooding, urban heat, biodiversity, and more – will be summarised in the next five-year National Adaptation Programme for 2023-2028, which will be published in 2022.
- The UK [Environment Act 2021](#) also passed – by coincidence, not design – during the second week of COP26.¹ The Act makes provisions for targets, plans and policies that improve the natural environment and contribute to more sustainable places. For a more in-depth policy briefing on the Environment Act 2021, [see here](#).

¹ UK Government (2021) *Press Release: World-leading Environment Act becomes law*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/world-leading-environment-act-becomes-law>



Background

COP26, the 26th global climate conference held in Glasgow in November 2021, was a defining moment for the planet and for humankind. It offered the potential for ambitious commitment and actions from all UN nations to limit global warming in the next decade to 1.5°C.

The two weeks saw several multilateral pledges and declarations made, leading finally to the 'Glasgow Climate Pact', which builds on the 2015 Paris Agreement and 1992 Kyoto Protocol.²

What were the UK Government's goals for COP26?

The UK Government holds the COP26 presidency for the remainder of 2021 and will continue to advocate for global action before passing the baton to Egypt for COP27 in November 2022.

As COP host nation, the UK has invited scrutiny into its own carbon reduction plans, with the expectation that it will lead from the front. The UK Climate Change Committee has indicated that the government's current ambitions are not sufficient to meet its emission reduction targets, and to globally set standards on the pathway to net zero requires mapping out further policies and proposals in the government's Net Zero Strategy.³

The UK set the following goals for its COP presidency:⁴

- 1. Secure global net zero by mid-century and keep 1.5°C within reach:** This goal involved countries setting ambitious 2030 emissions reductions targets through Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).⁵ To deliver on these targets, countries will need to mitigate through acceleration of coal phase-out, increased investment in renewables, halting and reversing deforestation, expediting the move to electric vehicles, and reduction in methane emissions.
- 2. Adapt to protect communities and natural habitats:** This goal included adaptation commitments to protect and restore ecosystems, build defences, enhance resilience through embedding early warning systems, and strengthening infrastructure and agriculture to become more resilient to increasing extreme weather effects, focussing

² United Nations Climate Change (2021) *Glasgow Climate Pact*. <https://unfccc.int/documents/310475>

³ Climate Change Committee (2021) *Independent Assessment: The UK's Net Zero Strategy*. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/independent-assessment-the-uks-net-zero-strategy/>

⁴ UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021 (2021) *COP26 Explained*. <https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/COP26-Explained.pdf>

⁵ United Nations Climate Change (2020) *Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)*. <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/nationally-determined-contributions-ndcs/nationally-determined-contributions-ndcs>



mainly on developing countries. Action on Adaptation at COP26 considered the following as key priorities:⁶

- Planning and finance to develop early warning systems and enhance infrastructural and agricultural resilience;
 - Protecting and restoring habitats to enhance resilience; and
 - The production of ‘Adaptation Communications’ – a mechanism by which all countries provide information on any adaptation actions they are taking to address climate risks.
- 3. Mobilise finance:** Aimed at developed countries, this goal addressed unfulfilled commitments made at COP21 in Paris, where countries had promised to raise by 2020 at least \$100 billion annually in climate finance to secure global net zero. The objective at COP26 was to initially secure public sector finance, which would then set the pathway to anchor (through stricter standards and regulation) private sector finance.
- 4. Work together to deliver:** The objective of this goal was to finalise the rules required to implement the agreements made at COP21, called the ‘Paris Rulebook’; speeding up global climate action through more meaningful collaborations between governments, businesses, and civil society.

What did the landscape profession want?

The Landscape Institute (LI) set out three top-level goals for COP26:

- **Prioritise climate adaptation as well as mitigation**, including implementing the recommendations of the Climate Change Committee’s adaptation assessment – for example, improving urban biodiversity through investment in green infrastructure and sustainable drainage systems (SuDS).
- **Take a natural capital approach to government housing and infrastructure investment.** Public investment should be steered towards projects that restore and enhance nature as well as generate economic returns. Higher standards are needed for all new infrastructure and housing, including employing a landscape-led approach.
- **Invest in green skills throughout the economy.** The UK’s climate commitment requires a cross-sectoral, market-wide transformation to a low-carbon economy – not just in tech sectors. This is only possible with skilled people that bring an integrated understanding of the built and natural environment. There is a significant skills shortage in the UK built environment, and the government should collaborate with professional bodies to address this skills gap.

⁶ UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021 (2021) *Adaptation: Urgently adapt to protect communities and natural habitats*. <https://ukcop26.org/cop26-goals/adaptation/>



The LI published its Climate Change position statement, *Landscape for 2030*, in March 2021.⁷ The publication highlighted the central role that landscape practice can play in tackling climate change, with eleven case studies showcasing on-the-ground interventions. This was the basis for our recommended interventions at COP26.

⁷ Landscape Institute (2021) *Landscape for 2030: How landscape practice can respond to the climate crisis*. https://landscapewpstorage01.blob.core.windows.net/www-landscapeinstitute-org/2021/04/12510-LANDSCAPE-2030_v6.pdf



Headline outcomes

During COP26 and in the months prior, several multilateral pledges and declarations were made, leading finally to the ‘Glasgow Climate Pact’, which builds on the 2015 Paris Agreement and 1992 Kyoto Protocol.

For some, the summit delivered more than forecasted (such as global methane pledges and commitments to ‘phase down’ coal). For others, it has been less successful (emission reduction pledges have not been ambitious enough, not enough global finance has been mobilised, and there have been no conversations on fossil fuel abatement), and our last opportunity to effectively limit warming to 1.5°C has been wasted.⁸

Whatever your view, the hope of limiting global warming to 1.5°C is still alive. But it calls for further urgent, global ambition.

COP26 marks the end of the first ‘ratchet’⁹ cycle of the Paris Agreement, which has seen a substantial increase in ambition and significantly reduced risks of global temperature rises of 3–4°C or more. The ratchet mechanism ensures that if negotiations fail to achieve actionable commitments, subsequent climate commitments and actions are progressively more ambitious. Based on current policies and the emission reduction commitments made at COP26, it is estimated that we are now on a pathway between 1.8°C and 2.1°C of global warming.¹⁰

The Glasgow Climate Pact

The Glasgow Climate Pact is a unique, cross-sector political decision, which calls on countries for more ambitious policy implementation and national emission reduction targets by COP27 in November next year.

Some of the notable highlights of the Pact are:

- For the first time in the history of COP, there is a call for a ‘phasedown’ of coal. Furthermore, the Pact establishes mechanisms to deliver a ‘Global Goal on Adaptation’, increased levels of climate finance, and finance for loss and damage.
- ‘Loss and damage’ emerged as a key issue at COP26 and had a significant impact on the negotiations, as developing countries and island nations called

⁸ SciLine (2021) *COP26: UN climate summit in Glasgow*.

<https://www.sciline.org/climate/quotes-cop26-glasgow-summit/>

⁹ Carbon Brief (2015): *Explainer: the ‘ratchet mechanism’ within the Paris climate deal*.

<https://www.carbonbrief.org/explainer-the-ratchet-mechanism-within-the-paris-climate-deal>

¹⁰ Birol, F. (2021) ‘COP26 climate pledges could help limit global warming to 1.8 °C, but implementing them will be the key’, *International Energy Agency*, 4 November 2021.

<https://www.iea.org/commentaries/cop26-climate-pledges-could-help-limit-global-warming-to-1-8-c-but-implementing-them-will-be-the-key>



for funding support for vulnerable nations to recuperate from climate change-induced loss and damage.¹¹

- There is still potential to ratchet emission reduction ambition, as the Pact requests countries to produce new climate plans every year, instead of every five years. Countries have been asked to improve their climate targets by the end of 2022 to limit warming to 1.5–2°C by 2030.
- In addition to mitigation and adaptation, discussions took place for the first time on a separate finance stream for loss and damage. Talks on this were inconclusive and have been deferred until next year.

While the Pact ‘requests’ countries to ‘revisit and strengthen’ their climate pledges by the end of 2022, it has fallen short of achieving the 45% emissions reductions needed in the near term (by 2030) to limit warming to 1.5°C.¹²

In the words of COP26 President Alok Sharma, ‘The Glasgow Climate Pact, agreed by almost 200 countries, is a historic agreement that advances climate action. It is the result of two years of marathon work and a two-week sprint of negotiations, and I think we can say with some credibility that we have kept the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5° within reach’.

The UK’s Net Zero Strategy

In the context of NDCs, the UK’s near-term 2030 emission reduction targets are globally one of the most ambitious. However, the policy mechanisms and actions that can drive this ambition are not all in place.

The UK’s October 2021 *Net Zero Strategy* provides the overall framework to deliver its climate ambitions and headline actions to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The UK now needs to match its rate of action with the overall ambition set out in national and international targets.¹³

From the landscape sector’s perspective, there are positive initiatives within the strategy – for instance, in the areas of sustainable transport, heat in buildings, green finance, and green jobs. The strategy, however, lacks detailed policies for green infrastructure investment. The LI has called for more focus on the following areas:¹⁴

- Detailed policies and investment initiatives in nature-based solutions and green infrastructure that go beyond investment on peat restoration, woodland creation, and management.

¹¹ Carbon Brief (2021) *COP26: Key outcomes agreed at the UN climate talks in Glasgow*. <https://www.carbonbrief.org/cop26-key-outcomes-agreed-at-the-un-climate-talks-in-glasgow#overview>

¹² UNFCCC (2021) *COP26: Update to the NDC Synthesis Report*. <https://unfccc.int/news/cop26-update-to-the-ndc-synthesis-report>

¹³ Climate Change Committee (2021) *COP26: Key outcomes and next steps for the UK*. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/cop26-key-outcomes-and-next-steps-for-the-uk/>

¹⁴ Plowman, T. (2021) ‘Landscape Institute responds to government’s Net Zero Strategy’, *Landscape Institute*, 21 October 2021. <https://www.landscapeinstitute.org/news/landscape-institute-responds-government-net-zero-strategy/>



- Higher ambition on urban greening standards for new housing and infrastructure, including a shift from grey to green infrastructure solutions.
- Establish clear targets for rural land management to reduce agriculture and land use emissions.

It now remains to be seen whether the ambition in emission reduction in this decade is backed by policy development and delivery. Unless there are corresponding emission reduction increases in the UK's 2030 ambition, its long-term targets cannot be considered reliable.

The Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA)

The Paris agreement called for climate finance to be balanced across different streams. However, climate finance currently focuses primarily on mitigation activities. At COP26, for the first time, a range of new financial pledges (\$100 billion by 2023 and commitments to double adaptation finance) were made towards the Adaptation Fund.

Other notable highlights are:¹⁵

- The launch of a two-year Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh Work programme on the Global Goal on Adaptation. Four workshops will take place annually, starting in 2022. The activities in this work programme will build on the work of the Adaptation Committee.
- Underpinned by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCCs) findings, discussions at COP26 also considered the urgency of global adaptation action. Following this, developed countries committed to doubling contributions from 2019 levels to climate finance adaptation for developing countries by 2025^{Error! Bookmark not defined.}.
- One of the objectives of the programme is to enhance national planning and implementation of adaptation actions through NDCs and adaptation communications.
- Race to Resilience:¹⁶ A UN-supported initiative, through a platform called Resilience Hub. The aim of this campaign is to align and recognise non-state, private sector stakeholders that can become allies in climate resilience, whether through practice or private sector investment in adaptation. One of the outcomes of the 'Race to Resilience' initiative, which is of relevance to the landscape sector, is the launch of the 'Summary for Urban Policymakers' (SUP) in 2022. This document will present the latest IPCC assessments in accessible and targeted summaries that can help inform action at city scale. This document will be co-produced by policymakers and IPCC scientists and will result in a succinct, regionally specific and policy and action-relevant compilation of:
 - the physical aspects of climate change;

¹⁵ UNFCCC (2021) *Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh work programme on the global goal on adaptation: Proposal by the President*.

https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/cma2021_L14E.pdf

¹⁶ Race to Zero (2021) *Race to Resilience: A global campaign to build climate resilience*.

<https://racetozero.unfccc.int/system/resilience/>



- adaptation measures that can enable long-term, equitable sustainability, and resilience in our world’s cities; and
- opportunities to mitigate climate change impacts in urban areas, large and small.

UK climate adaptation policy

One of LI’s key asks ahead of COP26 was that the UK Government give equal consideration to climate adaptation, as well as climate mitigation.¹⁷ One legacy of COP26 is that, through the lens of adaptation, we are for the first time widely considering an integrated approach to the multiple challenges of climate, nature, and public health.

Internationally, the government has committed to £15 million for an Adaptation Fund supporting developing countries to lead action, and £1 million to support delivery of faster and better global humanitarian support in response to climate-related disasters.

While there is an increased focus on adaptation on the global level, within the UK, much more planning and action is required to address the impacts of climate risks and enhance resilience. In the UK, the CCC recommended in its 2021 progress report that the UK Government reinforces its adaptation policies, currently contained in the National Adaptation Programme 2018-2023, which will be updated next year.¹³ In line with the Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh Work programme, the CCC also recommends that the adaptation plans be considered within updated NDCs.

The work within the ‘Race to Resilience initiative’ is of relevance to landscape practitioners, as we are already embedding climate-resilient measures through our design practice, creating low-carbon places at all scales, from public squares to eco-parks.

The Environment Bill passed into UK law in the same week as conversations on adaptation and loss and damage took place at COP26. The Environment Act aims to halt species decline by 2030, improve air quality, and deliver Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) to build a national Nature Recovery Network.

The landscape sector is already showing what good adaptation looks like in practice and how we can deliver a sustainable recovery from the pandemic.¹⁸ Sustainable measures such as urban green infrastructure designs for natural flood management, energy, and carbon-efficient strategies (green roofs and water-efficient design) can not only embed nature-based solutions, but also enhance climate resilience.

¹⁷ Sokhi-Watson, D. (2021) ‘What is COP26 and why is it important?’ *Landscape Journal Autumn 2021: Making COP26 count*. https://issuu.com/landscape-institute/docs/li_journal_4_cop_edition/s/13631567

¹⁸ Landscape Institute (2020) *Greener Recovery: Delivering a sustainable recovery from COVID-19*. <https://landscapewpstorage01.blob.core.windows.net/www-landscapeinstitute-org/2020/09/12332-greener-recovery-v6.pdf>





Useful links

Landscape Institute (2021) *The Landscape Institute at COP26.*

<https://www.landscapeinstitute.org/policy/cop26/>

Climate Change Committee (2021) Independent Assessment: The UK's Net Zero Strategy.

<https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/independent-assessment-the-uks-net-zero-strategy/>

UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021 (2021) *COP26 Explained.*

<https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/COP26-Explained.pdf>

United Nations Climate Change (2021) *Glasgow Climate Pact.*

<https://unfccc.int/documents/310475>

Climate Change Committee (2021) COP26: Key outcomes and next steps for the UK.

<https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/cop26-key-outcomes-and-next-steps-for-the-uk/>

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