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Nilam

Hello and welcome to the fourth episode on Net Zero Talks Podcast Series brought to you by Innovate UK KTN. I'm Nilam Banks, Transfer Manager for Place and the lead for Net Zero Places Innovation Network, which is a two-year flagship programme dedicated to supporting local and regional authorities and agencies to connect, collaborate, inform share experiences, and lessons learned in order to adopt innovation and level up across the UK. Before I introduce our guests today, let me tell you a bit about the podcast series and the innovation network. The Net Zero Talks podcast series has been created to hear from the experts and other local authorities on challenges to reach Net Zero. So basically, we work with local authorities to help identify the challenges to meet Net Zero. promote these challenges to our engaged innovators across sectors and collaborate with public buying organisations to make sure the solutions are procurement ready. Our goal is to provide practical insights into different topics and how to achieve Net Zero in places. Also, before deep diving into the topic today. If you haven't already, please go to the Innovate UK KTN website through the link in the description and sign up to receive a newsletter and updates on all our activities. In this episode, we ask our guests, how can collaboration with academia support decision-makers on climate adaptation. In this discussion today, let me introduce to you our host Kezia Williamson, Head of Place at Innovate UK KTN and our special guests today, Alex Rainbow, Carbon Neutral Cornwall Assessment Specialist at Cornwall Council and Jess Dickon, Research Fellow at European Centre of Environment and Human Health at University of Exeter. So, over to you, Kezia.

Kezia

Thanks, Nilam. I'm Kezia Williamson, Head of Place at Innovate UK KTN. My role is to connect national and regional innovation and encourage the distribution of economic and societal well-being across the UK. That means doing activities in places for the benefit of those places, like getting to net zero faster, which is absolutely the goal of our Net Zero Places Innovation Network. Alex and Jess, thank you very much for joining us today. Before we start to be great if you could take a minute to introduce yourself to our listeners. Alex, would you like to go first?

Alex

Hi, yes. Thanks for having me on today. So I'm Alex Rainbow. I'm the Carbon Neutral Assessment Specialist at Cornwall Council. I work in the Carbon Neutral Cornwall team, whose job it is to get us to our goal of net neutrality by 2030. Along with working to improve the state of admissions in Cornwall as a county and I've had a few jobs at the council but principally I look after the council's carbon inventory. I've also been involved in decision-making and changing our decision-making to factor in climate change, into the way that we work. In terms of this project. I've been the Cornwall Council Lead for part of the project in

terms of our input as both stakeholders and as an organisation that was helping to build the tool that we built originally.

Kezia

Okay, brilliant. And Jess.

Jess

Hi, my name is Jess Dickon. I'm a Research Fellow at the European Centre for Environment and Human Health, which is part of the University of Exeter. We're based in Cornwall, and I'm on the team looking after the local climate adaptation tool which we call LCAT.

Kezia

All right, so for anybody who's not familiar with this tool, could you just give us a bit of an intro to the tool and what this is all about?

Jess

Yeah, sure. So the LCAT tool, and I'll refer to it as that throughout, as that's the acronym we use, is a tool which is a digital tool co-designed with stakeholders who are in decision-making roles within the local area, looking at providing future climate maps, providing impacts on particular sectors and on human health, and then providing evidence-based recommendations for action for those decision makers in those local areas.

Kezia

Okay, great. So how and when did this collaboration come about?

Jess

So the project began back in early 2020, just before the pandemic hit. It was part of our outreach work with local areas to try and understand how we as a university, particularly our team, who are obviously focused on the intersection between environment and human health, how we might look at knowledge exchange, how we might consider our impact for those local decision makers and so that we can bring value to the research that we do and put it into action. So we gathered a number of different stakeholders working across the local authority, NHS, emergency services, and the voluntary and private sectors to ask what actually is happening on climate change adaptation locally. What the barriers are levers to action? What health impacts are of concern to you, as decision-makers? And what role do you think we can play? How can we help you essentially? And that led to a project that has grown really over the subsequent two and a half years, it's involved a lot more stakeholder engagement. We've worked with co-design principles to work with their stakeholders. So the resulting project that we now work on and the tool is something that has been done in collaboration, the design, the interface, the functionality of it, is all informed by that feedback, that insight from our stakeholders. So it's very much a partnership project.

Kezia

So from the authority perspective, what's been the value of that collaborative approach for you?

Alex

I think, from a local authority perspective, having the skills and the knowledge of academics is just vital. I think as, with most local authorities, we're a little bit stretched in terms of our resources, so to do something truly innovative, that involves a substantial level of research and understanding of the broader academic principles of a subject is quite difficult for us to achieve. I mean, there's also the, I guess, a skills gap in the local authority, we're not, not everyone, but very few people have those skills that are possessed by academic researchers and can take that kind of approach to developing an evidence-based approach to a subject. So that, it's not the only project that we collaborate with the University of Exeter on, but it is, it's a very, very fruitful thing for us to have that as part of what we're trying to achieve, because I think an evidence-based approach is incredibly important, in how we approach such a major challenge of climate change. So that's a big part of the value there, that and there are also resources that can be pooled, and you can end up with something that's more like a greater than the sum of its parts. To be honest, when you have that collaboration between an academic institution with its focus on research and a local authority that has the sort of real-world output for a lot of that, we need practical solutions, but they have to be based on evidence so that fusion of those two different approaches is just incredibly important for us going forward in our agenda as regards climate change adaptation.

Kezia

Yeah, absolutely. And have you seen some practical solutions or some tangible benefits from it already? Or are we too still too early for them?

Alex

Oh, absolutely. Whilst the tool itself is still in developmental stages, still in its initial phases of development, what it has done is helped catalyse the understanding of the true depth of adaptation and what it really means. Public health is a huge part of what a local authority does it. I mean, it's arguably the biggest part is, of what we do is, looking after people, making sure that they have the ability to lead productive lives, happy lives, safe lives, and that they live in the kind of environment that fosters that and that's a big part of the motivation for what we do. And climate change adaptation, it has not been at the forefront of local authority thinking when it comes to climate change. I think when most people approach climate change, they think of it from a mitigation standpoint. And adaptation was not something that we had very focused in our mind, it was definitely there on the periphery. There were people talking about it, because I think for the local authorities as well, adaptation is perhaps a more important part of the equation than mitigation. Not that mitigation isn't important, we should be doing everything we can to reduce our emissions. But given that we are effectively administrators over an area that's going to be radically affected by climate change, having access to both, one of the things that the tool does is it takes the predictions for the effects of climate across a wide range of, well the effects that climate change will have on an area across quite a wide range of parameters. So having access to that that Met Office data, I think it is, that's then condensed down to a local level and specifically local level, it is really important for us to understand at least the basic, what's going to happen across Cornwall? And then having, at least at this stage, the spectrum of potential impact opened up to us, if not, we're not at a stage where we have the tool completed and we have all the research input into it. But it's given us that first initial glance at to what the adaptation landscape looks like for public health and it's really helping focus the council on to making adaptation a priority because there's something tangible that we

actually have, there's a project that we're working on, that we can point to, that we can use in the future. So adaptation, as I said, is now it's helping generate adaptation as an idea and as a priority within the council.

Jess

And just to add to that, as well, it's interesting because in the stakeholder engagement I've done, I've had feedback from stakeholders across other decision-making organisations who are saying that just being involved in this project has pushed them to put this at a bit more of a forefront than it has been before because our initial findings were exactly what Alex is saying, you know, not much is being done. The focus, certainly two years ago was very much on announcing climate emergencies, thinking about mitigation, so reducing carbon footprint more than anything that was the terminology being used. And it's just really heartening, because it's one of those side effects, if you like that we hadn't really thought about, which is just doing this project is pushing people to think about it and do that work more, which is so exciting.

Kezia

Yeah, so it's creating some momentum than for the whole group?

Jess

Yes I'd say it's, creating more momentum locally. But actually, what's really exciting now as we move on to this kind of the second stage, if you like, of the development is we're going national, and we're out there talking to stakeholders in similar positions to our Cornwall group, but in other local authorities, and by the way, at a national level, because that's important for us to understand the kind of national policy landscape as that emerges, that actually, the enthusiasm there is huge, but the same issues that Alex has mentioned, are echoed across all other local authority areas, you know, this lack of financial and time resources, you know, that they want to do this work, but they're unable to take a huge amount of action. There are issues around a lack of expertise and confidence as a result. And what I keep hearing, as well as this issue of short term decision making, particularly in the public sector, which, as you know, is not new news but it's really useful for us as we build this tool, that it responds to that policy context within which our decision makers are working. Because if we understand that the culture is short-termist, generally speaking, you know, I recognise that's not always the case, but generally, you know, how do we build a tool that has the power and the right wording and the right data, so that it helps flip that? Because any work around climate change adaptation demands that we look at long-term decision making and so if we know that the context is, as I've said, we just need to be a bit more clever about how we design this and the functionality of it and that's what's like gold dust, really, what's so important about this code design approach.

Alex

I just want to add just a little anecdotal thing. This morning, I was out and I happened to go past a set of new houses that are being built, and they're being built right at sea level. And having this switch to having an adaptation lens on I'm just thinking, Oh, my God, this is something that we can't do, we can't build new houses at sea level, just for so many reasons but public health is definitely going to be one of them, and prosperity as well for in the future. And that's the kind of thinking that needs to be translated across all areas really within what we do as a local authority.

Kezia

Yeah, so it actually becomes more about a systemic change within the authority then, because that presumably needs to filter to planning, consent and those kinds of things.

Alex

Very much so. Yeah, public health is such a broad-reaching thing. It reaches into all the other areas that we're doing, as I said, planning, we've got to plan for the future, and we've got a plan for people's future health.

Jess

Yeah, I think as well, the approach we're taking is very much that we're providing evidence-based data and recommendations for action across a number of sectors. So for those who aren't familiar with the public health approach, it's concerned with prevention, but it's also concerned with health becoming everybody's business, whatever sector you're in, because it's so important that different sectors respond to the impact on humans. So what again, is quite unique and has power in this tool, is the fact that we have modelled it in that way. So if you work in transport, or planning or housing, there is information for you, for sure we're going through the lens of human health but actually, lots of that data is going to be really relevant to your sector. And again, what's really important with engaging with people who work in those sectors, is they can give us the insight and expertise from their sector that we aren't going to pretend we understand as experts in our area. But it allows us to account for nuance, account for maybe different terminology that we need to be using, and different ways of viewing and understanding the data that we present in this tool and we can refine things as a result.

Kezia

So Jess, I was gonna ask you, so you're talking in that collaboration then and we've talked so far about the sort of high-level collaboration, but it sounds like the collaboration actually needs to be quite deep and needs to be different roles within the council or within your stakeholders, rather than just the different stakeholders at an organisational level, is that right?

Jess

So it's been really important that we have a mix of stakeholders from across different sectors. So while we tend to, certainly now that we're looking more nationally, we tend to go in through environment, carbon neutral teams, whatever they're called within those organisations. Actually, the strength of the project so far has been that we've had transport, people housing, people planning, public health, environment, policy and strategy, all in the same room supporting us to codesign the tool and we want to replicate that as we go national. Because we need to hear from those different sectors in order to make this tool as useful as possible.

Kezia

How easy is that? Because I can see that, you know, if you're going to the climate change officer, and talking about climate adaptation, that, that's going to be super irrelevant. But do you find, has there been any difficulty or challenges in getting some of those other roles into the room, where they might not see the same obvious relevance?

Jess

No, it's been really interesting for me that that hasn't been an issue so far. Because I think everybody's alive to the fact that we need to be integrating work on climate change within any sector we work within. There's such enthusiasm and interest. I think, particularly over the last couple of years, our culture generally, and I don't mean just professionals have moved in a way that means that climate change is the forefront of probably everybody's mind in some way. And for sure, different people come from different levels of understanding and education, if you like, on this topic area. But nevertheless, people want to do work on this. I recognise that adaptation, as Alex has mentioned before, tends to be the newer and less talked about area because it's been so much about mitigation and reducing our carbon footprint. But it doesn't mean to say that the interest isn't there. So actually, I found it fairly easy to engage people in different sectors and when we do approach them, I'm always offering a full introduction to this topic area so that they're not coming in cold. Most of my work starts with a bit of an intro to the topic area, and building some basic understanding of what we talk about when we're talking about adaptation and then when they see the tool, because we have a prototype, it brings it to life. And that prototype, we chose with stakeholders, one line of inquiry, and it's quite a small line of inquiry, but it's about active transport and that in and of itself helps because we haven't chosen healthcare, for example and so that in and of itself might alienate, because, of course, we're concentrating on the impact on human health at the endpoint. You know the fact that we focus on transport helps planners even to see oh, okay, this is for me, so I think that's helped.

Kezia

It's not just that it's a co-design, you're really taking that you're kind of customer first and customer, I don't know if customer is the right word, but stakeholder-centred, approach with what you're doing.

Jess

Yes, definitely. We're always interested in hearing how it's being used along the way too, for sure we're at quite an early stage, so it won't necessarily be being used a lot now. But as we build and develop it over the next 18 months, it will be something that we hope other areas will start testing for us. So that's a huge part of this next stage, we need people to be using it and letting us know where it doesn't work, where it sings, where it just isn't in plain enough English, for example, for them to understand what we're going on about. So this next stage is really crucial for us to keep going back and testing it with stakeholders.

Kezia

So what's your approach for the next stage then? How are you rolling it out? And how are you keeping this collaborative approach going as you get into more the testing and rollout, rather than the development of it?

Jess

So over the next year, especially, we are going out and talking to decision-makers in other local areas and that's not just local authorities, that would be people who work in the NHS, and voluntary sector, private sector, although largely, our focus tends to be local authorities and then the departments within them, and recruiting them to be part of an evolution of the stakeholder group we had in Cornwall. So we have a number of different local authority

areas who are already interested because this supports their journey as much as ours. In the summer, we hope to launch this new iteration of our stakeholder group and that group will go with us on this next stage of our journey to test, refine, strengthen and develop the tool. And what's exciting as well is that we will be able to add in much more data and information around the impact of heat specifically, the impact and recommendations around flooding specifically. And with our stakeholders, we will design together what the next focus will be because we want to respond to their needs and interests.

Kezia

Alex, what's the next phase of this from your perspective? Are you thinking about how you're collaborating with other councils and local authorities or what's your next stage, you've continued to focus within your own plans.

Alex

So for us, it's to make sure that we're still involved in this, we did contribute, and we had some funding to help work on the initial phases of this but that funding has gone. We want to remain as a key stakeholder helping to develop it, helping to test it, helping to refine it, so that it does still meet our needs effectively, but definitely, sort of scaled-down intensity to where we were before in this but it's something that is important to us. So yeah, we do want to continue being a part of this project. So yeah, that's it really, that's where we're at.

Jess

And for context, what's really great about this is we have a core project team, that's multi-agency and so Alex and some of his colleagues are in that core project team. So not just a stakeholder who comes to workshops that we host, but actually on that core project team with us and we have another non-profit organisation called Then Try This and they are kind of research developers, so they're the ones who are developing the actual tool itself and working with the functionality is one of their areas of expertise. So it's not just the university and it's not just Cornwall Council, but it's a group of three of us running the project, which is exciting.

Kezia

So are you looking, so I'm thinking about people listening to this podcast, are you looking for other councils or other stakeholders to get involved in your project?

Jess

Yeah, we'd love other places to contact us if this is a project that they have any interest in. So what they can do is two things, best option is to go to the profile page of this project on the European Centre for Environment and Human Health's website. So that's www.ecehh.org and search for Local Climate Adaptation Tool and on that page, at the bottom, you'll find a contact form. That is the best way to contact us.

Kezia

Brilliant and like I said, we'll include the details for that in the links with this podcast, so you can access that. What's the role of collaboration between local authorities when it comes to climate adaptation?

Alex

At the moment, I mean, I can only really speak from Cornwall's perspective, but there is not a great deal of it. Even for the more well-known area of mitigation, there is collaboration, there are projects going on but they're still slightly piecemeal, in my opinion, I came from waste and recycling before this and there was very, very strong collaboration a very well-established set of systems and networks that exist nationally, sub regionally for waste and recycling officers to get together, to share ideas to develop projects together. It's a very much smaller sector is climate change in whatever form it is and a lot of local authorities have a very little resource that they put across to this, so you know, possibly only one person who's the Climate Change Officer, and maybe they're only doing it part-time, whereas other local authorities are much better funded in that regard and have that as a higher priority for the actual spending. So, whilst there are some networks that do exist, there isn't a great deal, and when it comes to adaptation, even more so, even more, so adaptation is only just becoming a factor in the thinking of a lot of local authorities. We've had our struggles in terms of helping define the difference between the two things, mitigation and adaptation here for a lot of people who are involved in decision making and it's not been hugely easy, but it's been the focus of another part of the work that I do, changing our decision making systems here is to, again, push that idea that adaptation is a little bit different. So in terms of working with other local authorities, there are bits and pieces, we are part of the Devon Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, a group there that's looking at adaptation, and creating an adaptation plan there. But beyond that, I've had very little contact, I would say we've had very little contact beyond that in terms of adaptation. We've only just ourselves, employed someone to lead on adaptation in the council within the last two or three months, I think it was. So they're starting to establish a network but there's there isn't a great deal in terms of collaboration going on at the moment. And it's an area where we really do need to do that, as I said before, adaptation is almost more important than mitigation in terms of a local authorities' role in how we deal with climate change. So I think as it becomes a more established part of local authority thinking and this tool will help with that, undoubtedly, it will help with that, we expect to start reaching out and working together much more closely with other local authorities and other public sector and private sector organisations that are taking adaptation seriously and do have that as part of effectively their central remit going forward.

Jess

So to add to that, as well, it's definitely a gap from our side, we've noticed, just recently, colleagues in the University of Exeter have actually launched what's called a Community of Practice to try and bridge that gap to some extent and so that's a forum within which anyone interested or working on adaptation, not just in decision making roles, but researchers as well can come together and offer peer support, to share insights and thoughts and to notice gaps. Because there are lots of those, as Alex has said, so that exists and we can provide the links to that also because that's an open forum for people to attend. Yes, we talk sometimes about this project that I'm talking about today, but actually, it's a much more broad and open network. Again, there's real enthusiasm, an appetite for that, because people do want to reach out to their colleagues. One of the key findings from our stakeholders that I recall from the early days was saying that actually one of the ways to build their confidence as decision makers is to see and hear about other decision makers, having done those things, take that action, it really builds confidence. So I think it's an essential part. We hope that our project, again, almost something that we might not have necessarily realised right at the start but the project allows for that also, because in building a national network straightaway, you've got people from other areas talking to one another

and sharing insight, so I think that will be useful function actually, for this project as it develops.

Kezia

Yeah, we're seeing that same message coming through from the Net Zero Places Innovation Network too, which is more focused on the mitigation side, but you know, this is all part of the same puzzle, isn't it really, that we're bringing people together and sharing these common challenges? Seeing where we can work together on some solutions as well. And I wonder, I don't know if you're seeing this yet, with how far you've got in your, in your development. What are the commonalities that you're seeing so far in terms of the kinds of actions that might need to be taken? So is it quite place-specific? Are there common actions that you would be looking at for councils or other stakeholders to do on the basis of climate adaptation?

Jess

So at the moment, the project is only at the prototype stage. So I can't comment on whether there's a huge amount of commonalities just yet. Certainly from the prototype, which has focused on active travel, the small amount of insight I've had from practitioners in that area is that there's a crossover between some of the actions that they might take on adaptive travel across transport more generally. But that's the only insight.

Kezia

So watch this space. Is that something that you're going to be looking at? Or that you hope to pull out as insights from the next phase of development? Or are we still several steps away from thinking about that?

Jess

Yes, I think we're several steps away from that just yet. I have no doubt that there will be recommendations that are similar for different areas. I'm sure as well that the climate in certain areas will be similar, in terms of future predicted climate. What's quite interesting, as we move into this national focus is we're able to ensure that we have representation from different geographical areas. So for example, a city might be concerned with the heat island effect, which is not something that a rural place like Cornwall would necessarily be so concerned with, we as an area completely surrounded by water might be more concerned with flooding and sea level rise, compared to a city, you know, right in the middle of England. So I guess, those are the things that will be interesting to explore, as we go forward into this next 18 months.

Kezia

Okay, brilliant. And we're including the details for how people can get involved in your project in the podcast notes. We would encourage anybody that is interested to check it out and to contact the team. Thank you, Jess, and Alex. As we've said, all of the information on how to get in touch with the team will be included in our podcast notes. It sounds like an absolutely fascinating project and really, I could just talk to you for ages more about the next steps and what else we could do on this. So yeah, come back at some point and tell us how the next phase is going. In the meantime, I will pass it back over to Nilam to close out this talk. Thank you.

Nilam

Thank you, Kezia, for hosting this episode. And again, Alex and Jess for joining us today. We can't do these without our experts. So thank you so much for joining us and contributing towards our series. And thank you all for listening. All the links, as mentioned before are in the descriptions and don't forget to sign up to receive newsletters and updates on our latest activities. In the next episode, we will be joined by the Net Zero Hubs to get their insights on the common challenges authorities to face on their journey to net zero and how they overcame them. Thank you again for following us and we hope you enjoyed this episode and you will come back for more, until next time.

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