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The Climate Emergency and Place-Based Action: The Case of Climate Action Leeds, UK

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Abstract

This paper is based on our engagement in a cross-sector network in Leeds, UK, taking local climate action. It draws on in-depth engagements with participants in this network, to explore how they negotiate being in, while at the same time wanting to push beyond, a climate emergency. We found three emergent trends: a reworked interpretation of the climate emergency through longer-term, holistic, historically grounded, and politicised definitions; novel forms of disruptive, collaborative place leadership that could help respond to this longer emergency; and a value-based focus on a reparative ethics of self-care, people-care, and Earth-care that foregrounds climate justice and accountability to frontline communities. We end by recommending that place-based actors can enhance the effectiveness of their collective action by broadening emergency definitions, developing politics and strategy, and supporting values-based climate justice and equity.

Keywords: climate emergency; climate justice; climate action; sustainable cities

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1. Introduction

The term climate emergency is increasingly used to refer to the geo-physical reality of the continued breakdown of various Earth systems, with safe boundaries for human life being exceeded across climate, land use, chemicals, biodiversity, freshwater, and pollutants [1,2]. While these dangerous changes in Earth systems are undeniable and justify emergency-level responses, the focus of this paper is to explore what it means to act in an effective way 'like it's an emergency' [3]. The idea of a climate emergency gained prominence throughout 2018 and into 2019 as an analytical tool, policy response, and call to action. In that period, global scientists, protest and campaign groups, and policy makers and municipal leaders all threw their weight behind the climate reframed as an emergency to mobilise a step change in thinking and action. Coming out of its 2019 high point, the idea of a climate emergency has become widespread and normalised, tinged with a sense of failure to realise some of the early hoped-for changes, but also coexisting alongside a broader polycrisis.

We write this paper amongst the many well-established, but increasingly complex, debates on the climate emergency [4]. In this paper, we want to explore how those wanting to take climate action navigate this complexity. More specifically, as people supporting climate action in our own locality, we want to contribute to practical and analytical debates on how to build movements that are more effective and responsive in the context of a much longer, complex, historized, and politicised climate–nature–social emergency. Based on engagement with a cross-sector network taking local climate action in Leeds, UK, the contribution of this current research is to better understand novel ways of acting in a

climate emergency context that can build more lasting and effective local climate action movements. Specifically, we found three emergent trends amongst local actors which have the potential to scale to support more effective local climate action:

- Reworking and rearticulating the climate emergency through longer-term, historically grounded, and politicised definitions that avoid monolithic, overly scientific, or technocratic approaches;
- Creating novel forms of disruptive, collaborative leadership, which transcend siloed working to lay the foundations for workplace and institutional identities that can support life-sustaining policies and practices that are commensurate with this longer emergency;
- Supporting a values-focused approach based on a reparative ethics of self-care, people-care, and Earth-care that is accountable to global injustices, sustainable for individuals, and foregrounds climate justice that is accountability to frontline communities.

Our aim in this paper is not to call into question the scientific reality of climate and ecological breakdown, but to explore a more hopeful, collective, empowering, and progressive version of action when faced with emergency contexts. We want to take further Salamon's [3] (p. 7) insightful provocation that 'aside from panic, individuals and groups can also respond to emergencies with reason, focus, dedication, and shocking success'. Instead of creating moments of closure, panic, or exception, we follow Anderson's [5] (p. 24) call to ask 'what alternative models of emergency politics might be found in the encounters that make up scenes of emergency?'

2. Literature Review

Before we explore our findings, there are three specific themes which we suggest need working through, analytically or practically, for those acting and thinking in, and pushing beyond, a climate emergency— meaning-making; power, politics and strategy; and justice and equity.

2.1. Meanings of the Climate Emergency

The first is a set of dilemmas that relate to definitions, scope, time, pace, and scale. The 'climate problem' has a long tradition of being framed in different ways [6]. The current use of emergency joins a litany of other terms including crisis, disaster, catastrophe, chaos, and breakdown. The recent coupling of climate with emergency represents a novel departure from previous nouns. Emergency has an everyday meaning of an event that is high-risk, has immediacy, is uncertain, and requires urgent action [7]. In a policy context, emergency management [8,9] is well established and has traditionally focused on vulnerable places unprepared to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters or civil unrest associated with terrorist incidents, military incursions, communicable diseases, pollution, or extreme weather events. Here, emergency responses are often associated with evacuations, temporary shelters, and emergency provisioning with civil populations constrained through curfews, rationing, or blockades. Adding the accumulation of atmospheric carbon to such definitions of emergency presents difficult issues given emergency's common-place association with scarcity, disruption, constraint, loss, and trauma.

The use of the term climate emergency is relatively new, rarely appearing before 2018 apart from some limited references in the 2009 Copenhagen Declaration, a case for emergency climate action [10], and civic lobbying in the Australian municipality of Derebin around 2016 to declare the world's first municipal-level climate emergency. The year 2019 onwards represented a watershed for the term due to the convergence of a series of inter-connected events across public, policy, and activist sectors. First, high-profile scientific reports starting with the UN's special report on 1.5 °C of global warming reinforced the urgent need for action to meet zero-carbon targets by the 2050s or earlier [11]

and the dire consequences of not meeting them [12]. Second, #YouthStrike4Climate and #FridaysforFuture enabled millions of school children around the world to strike and demand urgent climate action [13], the protest group Extinction Rebellion used high-profile civil disobedience and global days of action to raise the alarm on inaction, and Green New Deal groups advocated for national plans of transformative action. This focus provided by scientists, activists, and campaigners was amplified through climate emergency declarations by local municipalities throughout the world with 2100 to date [14], and in the UK alone, over 75% of local authorities have declared a climate emergency [15].

In this period, the idea of emergency was often mobilised around the specific phenomena of excessive levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and their role in climate heating. While many of the statutory local authority emergency declarations, policy initiatives, and civic actions do refer to a combined climate and ecological emergency, the inter-relations are poorly developed, and ecological issues are less visible in terms of rhetoric and action. However, this focus on climate and ecology is often to the exclusion of a broader set of social and political issues around longer injustices in power, safety, equality of access to resources and representation, and wellbeing, as well as the continued reality of violence and oppression. Deployments of the climate as an emergency fail to encompass a sense of a longer multifaceted emergency not just associated with (a) climate breakdown and (b) ecological collapse, but also (c) the deep social inequalities and oppressions that are the hallmark of a much longer and globalised way of organising contemporary society and its economies. Focusing on the climate as emergency overlooks the interconnections between human, Earth, and natural systems and the growth logic of racialised, industrial, fossil fuel capitalism that has impacted them all, albeit in geographically uneven ways [16].

The problem facing those taking action, then, is that while the climate emergency has become a dominant global discourse [17], it is insufficient for describing the complexities of what humanity faces. In an age of a growing sense of polycrisis [18], the climate emergency now exists within a broader sense of collapse and decay across many human and Earth systems, a sense of fatalism, the resurgence of far-right populism, and militarised solutions especially in relation to migration [19]. Ultimately, the use of the term climate emergency has grown too widespread in a short time, used by different ideological interpretations and political projects. It has become an idea which tries to describe a range of complex and long-standing issues [20]. The climate emergency is too brittle and narrow a term and cannot do justice to the conceptual or practical work urgently required [21]. We have reached a point where it acts as an empty signifier, incorporated into global political discourse without fundamentally changing structural conditions [22].

Moreover, the climate emergency contains an implicit, although not universally agreed, time period and target date in the not-too-distant future—sometime in the 2030s—when according to accumulated scientific evidence, without sufficient action in the present, we will no longer be able to prevent irreversible and catastrophic climate breakdown in the near future. While the historic burden for this generation is terrifying, paralysing, and confusing in equal measures, there are a range of difficult issues here, summed up by Asayama et al. [23] as 'deadline-ism'. Not only are trauma and fear present, leading to inaction and denial, deadlines create a shift into urgent action that can further obscure the structural causes of long-standing problems around corporate power, inequality, discrimination, or social control. Moreover, as we explore below, this overlooks the fact that many people's present, rather than future, realities are defined as emergency contexts. There are also the real and understandable conceptual and policy confusions of what happens if deadlines are missed. The subtleties of exactly how complex systems operate remain unclear, or not understood in the first place, especially in terms of tipping points, feedback loops, cumulative budgets, or the need for precautionary or pre-emptive action. Moreover, there

are practical issues of what an emergency mode entails. More traditionally understood emergency contexts (floods, invasions, infections) usually have clearer beginnings and ends, which raises the further issue, as Hulme [4] notes: how do you undeclare an emergency like climate breakdown? How do we avoid being in a permanent state of emergency, and how do we maintain a coherent sense of the problem we are tackling and when it has been resolved?

Herein lies the complexity, and danger. The broad scope of the idea of climate emergency is being used to mobilise a range of social futures and policy responses [24]. While there are now public understandings about the growing reality of breakdowns in Earth systems, there is less agreement on what a climate emergency represents in terms of scale and scope. While we agree with the need for urgent responses, there are responses led by transnational corporations and elites that are successfully maintaining and accelerating state-backed corporate control, value extraction, land appropriation, and oppression. Worryingly, public responses to the climate emergency frequently overlook these new power dynamics and are more often based on despair, ignorance, avoidance, or hope that technological and geoengineering interventions can resolve the climate problem.

2.2. Power, Politics, and Strategy

Our second theme concerns power and strategy, especially what it means for place-based politics. While long-term planning to address climate change is a well-established feature of government policy and planning at every level, the use of climate emergency represents a newer recognition that the breakdown of Earth systems can no longer be dealt with through traditional risk management approaches [25]. But the framing of the climate as an emergency has further exposed the critical disjuncture between rhetoric and action, known as the know–do gap [26], which is increasingly evident in local state policy. While the IPCC [11,12] have described the change needed through a suite of adjectives including rapid, far-reaching, unprecedented, immediate, and large-scale, there is now a serious misalignment between these adjectives and what is occurring on the ground through strategising, resource allocation, and policy initiatives [27]. While this emergency turn in policy does move away from past gradualist approaches [28], particular places are still grappling with how to make a step change into large-scale reductions in greenhouse gases, never mind broader systemic issues around climate justice, community empowerment, and ecological recovery [29]. Ultimately, the significant amount of municipal-level climate emergency declarations that were issued have not significantly shifted the reality of local policy and planning [30]. It led to relatively narrow and conventional policy options around carbon mitigation at the expense of an expansive programme of social change, emancipatory democracy, and ecological restoration envisaged by groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Green New Deal, and the Youth Strike movement [31]. This policy narrowing was also exacerbated by the reality of squeezed resources and politically motivated attacks on municipal powers through fiscal austerity programmes.

Therefore, rather than simply a lack of action, more worrying are concerns that climate action will strengthen corporate power and deepen inequality. The climate emergency has shed further light on the dangers of place governance such as excessive corporate influence of new public management approaches, a preoccupation with economic growth as the main indicator for wellbeing, decision making contained in silos, and a lack of broad representation and empowerment [32]. Responses can also legitimise new forms of governance that are deepening technology- and corporate-based solutions, especially around costly and largely unproven geoengineering approaches such as carbon dioxide removal and solar radiation management. Echoing shock doctrine framings of disaster capitalism [33], there are concerns that regarding the climate as an 'emergency' consolidates state power and

corporate-led solutions as part of post-emergency planning and management [34] which represent 'states of exception', where the rule of law is suspended, the role of experts is enhanced, or new laws are introduced to confront perceived threats [35].

From this position, it is easier to see how the wider public may see the climate emergency as an attempt by over-zealous activists to unwittingly support versions of green authoritarian social control, thus sowing seeds of mistrust and division between climate activists and the general public. Such divisions are exacerbated by the fact that the idea of an emergency itself is a deeply contested and debated term within climate action movements [36,37]. On the one hand, some of the most impactful narratives around emergency have come from civil society and activist groups, following the lead of Greta Thunberg, Youth Strike, and Extinction Rebellion [38]. These extra parliamentary groups—what Wight [7] (p. 121) called 'disempowered challengers'—pushed hard for climate declarations to be adopted, inspired by Salamon's [3] (p. 12) comment that 'the goal of the climate movement must be to lead the public out of 'normal' mode and into emergency mode.' On the other hand, more justice-oriented activists are concerned about its undertones of greater state control and securitization, its engendering of panic and powerlessness amongst the public which can strengthen technocratic elites and top-down solutions, and blind spots in terms of broader historical issues of colonialism and racialised forms of capitalism [39]. They also have concerns that it can accelerate a sense of fatalism and defeatism, a tendency increasingly documented amongst younger age groups who are trying to process the stark and dire messages around climate breakdown [40].

Ultimately, those taking radical climate action have not done enough to own and explain a version of the climate emergency that reflects a more generalised state of emergency created by the market-based growth model of development [41,42]. Further, while Salamon's [3] intervention usefully focused on how an emergency mode can create productive action rather than just panic, it failed to fully situate and articulate this emergency mode in the longer socio-political historical context. The strategic challenge is to use the climate emergency as an entry point to advocate for anti-racism and anti-capitalism as part of a politicised project of system change based on a post-growth logic [43–46], drawing on frameworks such as doughnut economics, community wealth building, diverse economies, universal basic services, and the foundational or substantive economy [47,48]. This challenge takes climate action beyond a simple localist project [49], and instead involves hybrid, bottom-linked, 'middle-out' approaches, which bring together place-based actors to connect with progressive elements of the state to support disruptive social innovations that can create a more mixed social-solidarity economy [50,51], as well as post-capitalist self-provisioning systems that underpin daily wellbeing across areas such as water, housing, energy, food, and transport [52,53].

2.3. Justice and Equity

Our final theme relates to justice and equity, and specifically what the climate emergency means for politics especially in terms of local–global relations. As Cretney and Nissen [54] point out, the climate emergency can mean very different things ontologically and practically across places and times. In particular, declarations of climate emergencies from selected municipalities in higher-income countries can appear insensitive to the current uneven and unjust experiences of climate breakdown as well as historic traumas associated with previous emergency situations [55]. During the high point for the climate emergency narrative throughout 2019, many activists were caught up in the possibilities of radical change (and we include ourselves here), as well as embedded and legitimised versions which poorly reflected some of the original, politicised intents associated with pleas for urgent action and solidarity from frontline nations and communities in the Ma-

jority world—especially Pacific Islanders facing the loss of their homelands from sea level rises [56]. Many Global North activists supported the climate emergency without listening to, incorporating, and foregrounding the longer history of colonial and racialised capitalist development as part of the origin story for the climate problem.

As a result of such omissions, an assessment and critique of a longer understanding of colonial and racialised capitalism is often largely absent [57]. While many excellent broader interventions did emerge in this period [58], the climate emergency was allowed to creep into policy and action partly stripped of an agenda for holistic system change and a call for solidarity with frontline communities. As Hulme [4] echoes, 'Why should an emergency be declared for the planet, but not for the poor?' Therefore, we arrive at a position that calling a climate emergency could be deeply incompatible with achieving climate justice [3]. Specifically, the use of emergency discourse can evoke fear and trauma based on previous experiences of martial law, military incursions, or loss of property and loved ones. Advocating for emergency action from the Global North can be at best irrelevant and at worst hurtful and damaging, to those in the Majority world struggling to survive. This is especially the case if justice is reduced to local place-based interventions, through, for example, cycle lanes, public transport, or home insulation, without a focus on wider system change both locally, nationally, and globally.

Work from scholars critical of the resilience concept [59,60] is useful here in questioning what we want to make resilient, and for whom. If it is simply the status quo that is being preserved, then the value of resilience becomes minimal for many who are already marginalised or placed at higher risk by unequal systems and cultural norms. Here, we arrive at further concerns associated with state-based approaches to the climate problem which privileges the nation state and its military as agents, diverting action from community-based priorities, vilifying climate refugees as 'enemies of security' [19], and promoting securitized responses to migration at the expense of climate justice [61]. These considerations make clear the crucial and central importance of an expanded notion of justice and equity in any proposed emergency responses based on allyship and accountability and foregrounding justice on both local and global levels. The work of Flyvbjerg [62,63] and his concept of value-rationality further helps here, stressing the need to take climate action coherent with explicit values, rather than just focusing on specific outcomes. Therefore, the way the climate emergency is operationalised in terms of justice and equity is crucial; specifically, local climate action needs to be seen as part of a longer project against oppression, enclosure, and exploitation, foregrounding the intertwined and unequal story of colonialism and climate breakdown [16] while also promoting a collective ethics of care [64].

Indeed, climate action is an opportunity for an expanded notion of justice and equity beyond the hegemony of free market capitalism and a model of development centred around growth-based nation states [65,66]. We advocate for using emergency situations to create what Albert [61] calls a 'politics of the extra-ordinary' based on greater community self-management and ownership of key foundational systems that underpin daily well-being. The challenge is to support a vision of the state that can play a role in emergency responses as a reformed actor that can enable community justice and resilience rather than corporate power, growth-based economics, and fossil fuel development. Moreover, Anderson [8] (p. 475) reminds us that emergencies are not just states of exception; they represent intervals that can be imbued with hope where action can make a difference to the kind of future that unfolds, especially if 'we start from the use of emergency by non-state and non-sovereign actors to disrupt systems of rule'.

3. Methods

This paper is based on our close engagements with a coalition of actors mobilising around climate action in the city of Leeds in the UK. The focal point is Climate Action Leeds [67], a five-year programme of work funded by the UK's National Lottery, and its attempt to support a citizen-led movement to create a 'zero-carbon, socially just, nature-friendly Leeds by the 2030s'. Climate Action Leeds is a partnership encompassing researchers, entrepreneurs, third-sector partners and campaigners. Its origins are connected to a coalition of civic activists who first came together in 2018 prompted by Extinction Rebellion and the Youth Strike movements to press local state actors to declare a climate emergency. As a partnership, Climate Action Leeds (CAL) attempted to go beyond these activist origins to reflect the diversity of Leeds as a large post-industrial multi-ethnic city with significant geographical and social divisions, especially between its prosperous central core and deprived inner communities. CAL focused its activists on the creation of eight hubs for climate action based in community settings, which were purposefully selected to represent a range of settings from inner city to outer suburb. While this spread did stimulate climate action in community settings, the tension between the more ambitious and radical agenda of its originators and the slower and more patient work required in communities was never fully resolved, especially in terms of developing close relations with the city's significant Muslim, Afro-Caribbean, and Sikh communities.

This tension reflects and demonstrates wider issues with the whiteness of the environmental movement [68–71]. CAL is no different here and reflects a climate movement struggling to address the dynamics of structural racism. Climate Action Leeds still has 'a lot of (un)learning to do' [72], quoting Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 110. Our paper is a small contribution to this important work of climate justice, and our experience has shown that this work requires time and ongoing commitment as an essential element of creating authentic city-wide movements for climate action.

It is worth noting the entire period of Climate Action Leeds work was undertaken against a backdrop of post-COVID recovery, continued and entrenched fiscal austerity purposefully aimed at limiting the powers and role of the local state in the UK, and the vilification of climate activism. These factors combined to significantly hamper the ability to hold conversations, take action, and mobilise resources. Nevertheless, the municipality of Leeds represented a favourable context for the flourishing of local climate action. Leeds is a largely progressive, left-of-centre municipality with two major universities, cross-party support for climate action, and a suite of progressive policies on car reduction, nature restoration, and social equality. Its majority Labour council was an early adopter of a climate emergency declaration, going further than many places by creating a Climate Emergency Advisory Committee, a dedicated lead executive member and senior officer, pioneering a climate change citizen's jury, compulsory staff climate training, and adopting a zero-carbon roadmap produced by a university-backed Climate Commission. These favourable conditions were key ingredients in the initial success and momentum for Climate Action Leeds.

This paper draws on nine in-depth interviews with individuals from this partnership which took place between January and July 2023. We purposefully chose a deep qualitative approach to provide depth of insight and prioritise rich, detailed understanding over breadth or statistical representation [73]. From an initial list of 20 local contacts, we selected 9 interviewees based on availability, willingness to participate and explore themes in detail, and coverage of different sectors. Therefore, we purposefully selected a small sample of people from a range of sectors reflecting the 'quadruple helix' [74], covering state, civil society, market, and academy. Our interviewees included two researchers, two business entrepreneurs, one local authority councillor, one youth activist, two climate

justice campaigners, and a third-sector worker. Each interview lasted one hour and was based around a preset list of 10 questions covering their views on the meanings and origins of the climate emergency, levels of participation, views on limitations, gaps, and opportunities. The interviews were transcribed and hand-coded to draw out recurring themes. An initial list of six thematic codes was identified, which was subsequently merged to three and used to structure the discussion section of this paper around meanings, leadership, and a value rational ethics of care. Each of the findings sections was structured around these three themes, with interview extracts used to support the argument.

We note the limitations of this research in terms of reflecting the broader diversity of Leeds, in terms of income, ethnicity, and life chances. Overall, the interviewees represented those already engaged and informed on the climate emergency. However, rather than trying to capture the diversity of Leeds through our fieldwork—a route which in any case is not possible—our intention was to use a purposeful sampling strategy which sought key actors already engaged in, and conversant with, climate emergency action and importantly who were prepared to engage in a process of self-reflection and -critique, and offer insights in terms of its limits and future potentials. In our selection process, we made choices about who to include, and not to include, based on pragmatic issues of availability, capacity, and scope. Clearly, in this selection process, some key actors were omitted, including larger businesses and local state officers who may have given more pragmatic views on some of the issues raised in the paper. In-depth qualitative interviews can present challenges especially as they can raise sensitive and sometimes political topics. However, these challenges can be addressed by appropriately framing the questions, building up a rapport with interviewees, and providing opportunities for participants to reframe, omit, or even retract statements.

In addition, we drew on experiential insights from our work supporting Climate Action Leeds from 2020 to the present, which has included a training and engagement programme, the Leeds Doughnut Economics project, a city hub called Imagine Leeds and a city visioning process with eight transition areas. Our positionality in Climate Action Leeds is part of a long tradition of scholar-activism in our discipline of critical geography [75,76], playing a dual role as movement participants and academics who support groups and infrastructure that can create socially progressive change. We wish to acknowledge the elements of our own identities as white, cis-gendered, middle-aged academics, which grant us privilege, in this and other contexts. Ultimately, following the work of Cameron and Gibson [77], our aim is to use our engaged action research not just to report and analyse, but also to identify and amplify elements of a new and hopeful collective agency that can support local action and respond to the complex set of social, climate, and ecological emergencies in empowering ways. Below, we report on our key findings from Leeds which offer some momentum in this direction.

4. Results: Effective Local Action and the Climate Emergency

4.1. Reframing and Unlearning the Climate Emergency

Our first set of findings from our interviews and experiences relates to the ways in which the climate emergency is defined, critiqued, and reformulated. While the use of emergency does resonate with a scientific reality of accelerating the breakdown of Earth systems, from our interviewees, we found divergent and complex interpretations of what it means for action. Amongst this complexity, we are interested in understanding how narrower, state-centred, and technocratic versions can be 'unlearnt', and more holistic and broader aspects of a longer emergency supported within and between city actors to build effective relations that can translate into meaningful and sustainable action, without diluting the scale of the challenge.

Referring back to the mainstreaming of the climate emergency throughout 2018 and 2019, one respondent referred to the real buzz that existed due to the confluence of events around XR, Youth Strike, government declarations, and United Nations reports. For those we talked to, this brief high point represented a shift to a more politicised and systemic frame compared to pre-2018 discourses which focused on carbon reduction, climate risk, and mitigation. People referred to a window of opportunity that was widened through the international tour of Greta Thunberg and the anticipation of short-lived politically progressive projects such as Corbyn- and Bernie-mania in the UK and USA, respectively. More importantly, what was previously perceived as fringe or risky language started to circulate broadly. As one local entrepreneur told us, 'It's completely acceptable to say we are in a climate emergency. Nobody is now accused of being extreme', while one researcher commented 'You could introduce your work with the council as part of the climate emergency. That's a big deal'.

We found that this normalising presents unique challenges for those using the term. Compared to more conventional notions of emergency, the climate emergency has both short- and long-term, visible and less visible, and specific and widespread aspects. The climate as an emergency invites us to conceive of ourselves as facing an event that requires an urgent response but without the conditions of an emergency being consistently present across place and time, especially in higher-income contexts. One local politician expressed to us 'if you look out of the window, nothing's happening. There is no change, and the vast majority of people will not spend their spare time geeking out on the science'. In this gap between cause and effect, it is more difficult to widen the scope of what the emergency means and, as we explore below, steer the debate towards the longer historical emergency of colonialism, capitalism, and the growth economy.

While our respondents expressed a desire to take urgent action commensurate with an emergency, there were divergences and complexity as to what that something is, or who should act. Some respondents talked about the value of the climate emergency for speaking truth to power, to galvanise public opinion and put pressure on governing bodies to take urgent action. As one climate justice activist told us 'I can see it being useful as a campaign strategy to get governments to act, but I don't think individuals are responsible for the system. . . in a community setting what resonates more is inclusivity, accessibility, transformation, joy, healing, justice'. However, one third-sector worker noted that the word emergency could still be a useful focusing device at a community level as it 'taps into an emotional sense of what we might lose. We love where we live. It's an emergency because if we don't do something really fast, we're not going to be able to live here'. Indeed, a youth activist we talked to felt that neither the word climate nor emergency went far enough:

> *I'm shocked how much people are using the word climate change. Because it's not change right? We are talking about death on an unimaginable scale. If we are going to use a couple of words, it shouldn't be climate or emergency. It should be a death project.*

This point raises the key issue of urgency and pace. Urgency needs reframing not simply as a mode of action but as a mode of learning, understanding, and listening, and crucially, this needs to precede, or at least be synchronised with, action. However, the difficult reality is that emergency conditions are not conducive to developing deeper historical understandings, and this is especially the case under current conditions of misinformation, mistrust in formal politics, and vastly uneven levels of prosperity. A key task that many of our interviewees stressed, therefore, is how we use the climate emergency to develop new ways to communicate with the public, and how we embark on learning, but also, crucially, unlearning—where the 'climate problem' is reframed through discussion of where we attribute responsibility, the scope of the issues, and the historical narratives we use to explain them.

This broader understanding is reflected by the activities of Climate Action Leeds who use the idea of triple emergencies (climate, ecological, and social) and the shared goal of creating 'a zero-carbon, nature-friendly, socially just city by the 2030s'. As one of its co-founders told us, 'One of the reasons I helped create the framing of zero-carbon, nature-friendly, socially just was because I wanted to make sure it wasn't just about climate change.' Crucially, our respondents highlighted the need to present the climate emergency in a generative and longer-term context, rather than externalising it as an atmospheric abnormality that needs rectifying. This broader multifaceted interpretation of emergency creates the conditions to connect daily struggles. One of our respondents, a climate justice activist, commented on how 'people are already in a crisis emergency situation dealing with housing, schooling, food, property, but, you know, a climate emergency on top of that, if that term is used, needs to be linked to their everyday lives'. Moreover, Climate Action Leeds specifically appointed a climate and racial justice accountability partner to bring a broader awareness of the historical roots of colonialism and the need for allyship with frontline communities into climate action [78]. While this has broadened the scope for discussion, it has also presented challenges for many participants in terms of acknowledging and addressing the conditions that maintain climate action as a majority white space. This challenge was used as an opportunity to coproduce activities that try to address the whiteness of the movement including holding events with a local community centre run by the African and Caribbean community, exploring the role of the city in contributing to harms emerging from global supply chains using the Doughnut Economics model, undertaking a global mapping project to highlight the impacts of the climate emergency in locations outside the UK where Leeds-based communities have connections, and committing to leadership positions for marginalised groups in the next phase of the project from 2025.

Ultimately, what we heard from our interviewees and our own engagement was that the very premise of emergency action is unsustainable. The sense of urgency and panic it mobilises cannot be maintained and legitimated beyond a short attention and capacity cycle. Its overuse has desensitised many global North activists to actual emergency situations unfolding in parts of the world more acutely affected by the changing climate. We suggest future uses need to be reframed and more measured. We agree with one of our respondents who called it a 'bad couplet'. As the climate emergency is mainstreamed, it creates the conditions for exploring transformative visions of more thriving, liveable, just, and emancipatory places.

4.2. Place Leadership Beyond an Emergency Mode

Our next set of interview findings relates to a desire to create novel forms of leadership and governance that go beyond simply being in emergency mode and instead lay the foundations for disruptive and collaborative action which can support transformative policy, politics, and action. Repeatedly, participants articulated a sense that the contemporary moment is defined by dysfunctional institutions and working practices that enhance separation and siloed thinking (between ideas, humans, nature), in contrast to those that focus on regeneration, holism, and connection. As one social entrepreneur commented, 'You wouldn't expect the response of local authorities to be revolutionary because they were set up in the twentieth century. We don't have the governance for what we are now in need of systems thinking'.

There are several elements to this novel approach to place leadership. The first aspect relates to scope. A range of sectors—what we referred to previously as the quadruple helix of research, public, private, and civic—all play a role in place leadership. A local entrepreneur referred to 'a patchwork of actors all contributing in their own way'. Yet the simple copresence of different city actors is not sufficient. We encountered a desire to

radically reformulate relations between these sectors—both in terms of balancing power and changing the intent. Clearly the climate emergency provides a new purpose for self-generated leadership. As one youth activist stated, 'Like, who's going to sort this out? It's beyond bad and no one's coming in to save us.' One researcher reflected that 'we are not waiting for other people to arrive. We are throwing ourselves at it with all we've got'. Rather than rejecting existing place-based actors, emergency contexts demand that many sectors come together and in so doing change their deep purpose. We suggest they can become a local breakaway coalition that shifts from upholding the status quo of fossil fuel-dependent, unequal, and racialised growth to mounting and supporting a vision that can address the longer emergencies identified above. Clearly, this presents new challenges that need to be carefully navigated as more self-managed politics interface with more formal and top-down structures and institutions.

Second, this kind of emergent leadership harnesses networked knowledge and capabilities rather than just those contained within existing and formal institutions. A local entrepreneur told us 'Most of us don't see change—it's too dispersed but suddenly overnight you realise so much is being done. . .This is all work in progress, and it amounts to a huge amount of new knowledge.' One third-sector worker elaborated by stating 'Emergency responses in all these different institutions start to work together to create emergent dynamic governance'. Several interviewees elaborated that what is required in an emergency context is diffuse and small-scale, but highly networked, forms of innovation—much of which is generated out of necessity in particular contexts. This networked knowledge specifically rebalances power, empowers those traditionally excluded from policy making, and foregrounds movements which have traditionally advocated for them. A youth activist stressed the importance of social movement knowledge as part of this leadership mode: 'There are people that have been in social movements for decades. They know what they are doing'. Indeed, a key part is what one respondent called 'the wisdom of the elders' and what previous generations of activists offer in terms of what has gone before.

Third is the role of convergence spaces [79,80] in supporting disruptive place leadership. During our fieldwork, city actors were involved in the creation of an action hub called Imagine Leeds for different city sectors to come together and plan and act on the climate, ecological, and social emergencies, building on a new wave of climate emergency centres. One of the organisers explained its purpose: 'We haven't [previously] created a mechanism of city planning that will allow people to act in emergency mode', continuing to state that the city needed 'a new decision space where we are actually saying, 'This is what needs to happen,' and it starts to develop kudos and natural authority'. These action centres offer a key missing piece of the local policy and planning jigsaw—a place where real-time planning and information commensurate with the challenges we face can be held in common and shared. While central spaces build community and identity, we also found a desire to create smaller scale, yet highly networked, interventions. One respondent referred to the idea of acupuncture [81], where pressure is exerted on the wider nervous system (in this case the urban system) in order to tap into networks and unblock flows (in this case people, ideas, and resources). In a similar manner to acupuncture-based therapy, networked forms of leadership can begin to effect wider system change through multiple and diverse, rather than centralised, interventions—exploring and treating causes rather than symptoms and responding to feedback.

Fourth, while many of our respondents spoke about the need to ensure that climate responses are politicised, the complexities of what this means for relations to the local and national state were also expressed. One respondent said 'There can be no change that doesn't fundamentally challenge and do away with the state' (youth activist). However, most respondents referred to the necessary, but currently insufficient, role of the local

state, which is still a highly connected and locally embedded entity that can mobilise change in terms of resources, reputation, reach, and direction setting. Creating a more participatory state [82] was seen by most participants as essential to support new kinds of place leadership. Indeed, one environmental academic commented on the link between climate action and a wider democratic renewal, which draws on but goes beyond a renewed state: 'We need to double down on the response being a democratic one—people-led. . . A lot of social structures have to be transformed in order to tackle the climate emergency in a way that is socially just and that protects human welfare'. These tensions in terms of relations with state actors are not easily resolved. While there is a desire to identify and move beyond current nation-state politics in the long term, in the short term, there is a recognition that a radically reformulated state provides the necessary resources, regulation, and power for action.

Finally, this emergent form of place leadership is strongly geared towards action. Many interviewees referred to the desire to get things done, especially at the community level. However, this is not action for the sake of achievement. As one community organiser commented, 'How can we make life more meaningful through our actions? We are not averting the emergency, we are responding to the disaster and trying to live as well as we can within the disaster'. Another third-sector worker told us: 'Let's do something really cool in the community where people are working together. That's when you can have conversations'. Making and doing, therefore, is not an end point but a process. Rather than convincing or cajoling, making interventions offers the potential to learn through co-creation and lead by example.

4.3. A Values-Based Approach of Self-Care, Earth Repair, and Allyship

Our third strand relates to ethics and values which emerge in emergency contexts, especially as a counter-balancer to the tendency to act with urgency. While many of our interviewees are certainly working towards specific outcomes and do feel a sense of urgency, many also reflected the values-based approaches we referred to earlier [62,63]. Paradoxically, the urgent threat of climate change prompted discussions of the kinds of values that needed to be embedded in advance of taking action, particularly those which emphasised care and repair. This is an important departure from the emotional tone urgency and danger which tap into panic, fear, and stress.

Of particular significance was Climate Action Leeds' creation of a set of five values that guide its work (fairness and equity, safety and care for self and others, people's lived experience and knowledge, acting together, and nature connection and care). It states the following on its website [67]: 'Putting our values into practice is something we are continually learning how to do better. It is an ongoing process of learning and unlearning, and finding new ways to understand and act out our values together.' Notably, an original focus on 'emergency mode' as a value was later dropped based on concerns by coalition partners that, as one respondent noted, 'reinforces dominant white patriarchal culture; [is] not helpful to embrace climate justice concerns; contributes to normalising an unsustainable pace of work; [and is] part of the same value-frame used in securitisation discourses'.

In our interviews, we noticed several broad themes which generated insights into care-based approaches in an emergency context. The first related to values which support human life and care for others and for nature. For example, a youth activist posited that common human values break through so-called 'culture war' divides. A local councillor described climate action as 'a way of living your life—caring for the earth, caring for community.' Another respondent cited the Permaculture principles of 'Earth-Care, People-Care, Fair Share,' while a climate justice campaigner said 'We are earth repairers.' A local

entrepreneur spoke about the need to remember 'the heart' instead of just appealing to 'the head' in narratives of climate action.

Second, the idea of urgency was directly critiqued, with one respondent arguing it is linked to the wider (corrosive) culture of the capitalist economy:

> *'Urgency is kind of quite like capitalism. Like, 'Go faster, we've gotta respond to this crisis.' The opposite would be like when your body is in a state of rest and digest, then it can heal. And we have to slow down to be able to heal and to remember the root of the crisis.'*

In contrast to urgency, one third-sector worker we spoke to drew on practices of non-violent communication to evoke the 'space between stimulus and response', where we can pause and develop effective and just responses based on care and empathy, rather than the more traditional stimulus of 'fight or flight'. These values of life-sustaining care demonstrate a sense of purpose beyond specific outcomes or goals. Rather, the values-based approach that we found in our interviews highlights that action based on values, as much as outcomes, is more sustainable because it draws on shared understandings and desires and is less susceptible to the sense of failure.

Third, we found an ethics of care encompassing not just care for other people but also self-care and care for nature, as well as awareness of the dangers of activist burnout. One respondent spoke about their use of Stanford-Xosei's [83] concept of 'planet repair' [and see also 18] in their climate justice work, while another simply put it like this: 'What we're really trying to do is encourage people to find their best selves and to become more in relationship with the planet in order to care for it, and love it, in the same way that they do their loved ones.'

Thus, an ethics of care [84] for self and others was seen as crucial given the high stakes of a climate emergency context. A community organiser said 'Really, most people can't cope with the enormity of what's going on.' One respondent related a story of feeling the need to 'put everything I have' into climate action, but ultimately finding this to be damaging to their health, while another drew out an important generational element between older activists who 'sacrificed their health' to the movement and 'the younger actors coming up now' being more aware of the need for rest and time away from work.

What is clear from these comments is that being in emergency mode can have damaging impacts on mental and physical wellbeing. One climate justice activist described the impact in this way:

> *'If you're working at 100% all the time and something shit happens, then you've got 0% bandwidth to add anything else, and you just tip over into burnout or negative health. But if you work at spaciousness. . . you can act with urgency when there's a moment of mobilisation that has to happen.'*

One respondent talked about the need to balance the 'heroic phase' in a time of crisis with the 'recovery phase' where people go the distance and sustain long-term action well after crisis moments. This idea of spaciousness is crucial, not just in terms of personal and group wellbeing, but to building effective movements. As one climate activist respondent stated, 'we need everyone in the fight. . .we need people healthy.' They went on to explore the very different responses that people can have to emergency and urgency:

> *'People respond differently and people shut down, people freeze, people run. And so I think it's about a temperature check of where people are. . .. And moving with compassion, because there's no judgement of these responses because these are bodily responses.'*

Fourth, respondents also suggested that the idea of climate emergency could feel overwhelming for individuals, or irrelevant to people dealing with more day-to-day emergencies in their immediate life circumstances. One community organiser commented 'Often

it is used by activists in a sort of evangelical way… For most people I work with, it just doesn't resonate or meet them where they're at.' So, while respondents said they thought the narrative of emergency does have a role in strategically lobbying for state action, it was felt that it is disempowering to civil society. One climate justice activist said 'That's what we've been trained to do, hand over power to emergency services and call in other people.' Some interviewees pushed this critique further asking 'For whom is it suddenly an emergency? And who will the emergency response serve?'

Fifth, we found an important set of values around reparations and its foundational meaning around repair and healing [85]. One respondent elaborated that the idea of reparations extends far beyond monetary issues. As they explained, reparation has a meaning 'to fix, rather than to pay… Money is, like, 1% of the reparation. It's all about self-repair. It's all about holistic community law repairs, historical repairs, you know, repairing everything that's been colonised and has been destroyed'. Another respondent, an environmental academic, thought about justice from a different perspective, stating 'For me, the biggest injustice is the damage we are doing to other parts of the world…, so…the biggest thing that would help all parts of the world is rapid, urgent reduction in carbon emissions.' However, while rapid carbon reductions in one place can stabilise heating on a global level, depending on how they are delivered, they can also further entrench and accelerate unequal power dynamics, which in the short term makes life less tenable for others, especially in the Majority world. A local entrepreneur spoke about the need to 'work in a different way that gives us time to imagine and figure… taking the time to feel, rather than jumping into Western, rational, problem-solving mode and reproducing damaging power dynamics'. It is these kinds of moral and practical dilemmas that must be foregrounded and thought through by those acting in the context of a climate emergency.

Finally, a central part of this ethical approach is climate justice [86,87]. Specifically, we heard participants articulate versions of justice based on allyship and accountability [88] with frontline communities most affected by climate change, both locally and globally. One respondent emphasised that many uses of the climate emergency have lost a grounding in the origin story from frontline communities:

> *'A lot of people don't know the history and the lineage of the root of the word [climate emergency], and that possibly furthers the alienation from the term… If it was contextualised in the story it emerged from, this is the accountability we hold to those people who came up with that term. I think it would bring a lot more people in…'*

Foregrounding the stories of those on the frontline who are dealing with emergencies in the everyday also allows us to shift away from a narrative of individual blame and responsibility towards collective power. These approaches raise the broader issue of the role of popular education in climate action—listening to and learning the histories of frontline communities to create a culture of accountability and solidarity [89]. In summary, a values-based approach grounded in care and justice presents a strategic opportunity to harness the prevailing sense of urgency to advance more effective local climate action, which transcends conventional practices and confronts the structural limitations of the predominant whiteness of climate action.

5. Discussion: Where Next for Local Climate Action?

This article is written in a world where the climate emergency exists in various guises—as a heuristic device for sense making, a media meme, an activist agenda, a funding opportunity, a policy programme, and a tragic reality for a small but growing number of people around the world destroying their livelihoods and sense of a safe future. It is a classic wicked problem—both visible and invisible, here and not here, and comprehensible and incomprehensible. These aspects cannot be changed. Our intention is not to agree with,

or refute, the reality of a climate emergency. Rather, in this paper, we have explored some emerging possibilities for local action that do not get stuck in climate emergency mode but instead use the last few years as a rich resource of ideas for policy, action, and learning. The key aspect for us now is what we do with emerging new understandings to help shape what happens next.

In summary, in our engagements with local actors taking climate action in Leeds, we found three emerging tendencies, each of which offers specific proposals for policy makers, researchers, and campaigners. First, the term climate emergency is beginning to reach the limits of its utility—in no small part because of its practical and emotional connection to tragic and traumatic events as well as overlooking broader historical and politicised issues. There was a desire to rework the climate emergency in terms of scale, scope, and pace. We suggest that when the term climate emergency is used, it avoids creating a sense of urgency, blame, or panic, but instead it is used to promote shared understandings of longer emergencies in their political, historical, and international contexts, which highlights the harm already being done in the Majority world. We suggest it is also used to promote debate and action on what comes after emergency situations especially in terms of positive improvements to local daily life in transport, food, housing, and energy, for example.

Second, we saw novel forms of collaborative and disruptive place leadership which represented the beginnings of a local breakaway coalition capable of transformative, life-affirming action. Emergency declarations are a starting point, rather than an end point, for civic actors to form alliances and push for more radical and transformative changes at a local level. Our recommendation is that more movement-aligned actors use the climate emergency to demand a recognition of the scale of the challenges, a radicalisation of policies commensurate with this challenge, and a commitment to participatory social change [90]. Those involved in local politics and strategy need to avoid rebooting greener versions of capitalism and instead advocate for a programme of genuine social emancipation based on post-growth, doughnut and diverse economics, car-lite cities, community housing and energy, local reparation charters, and rewilding and nature restoration, for example, as new priorities.

Finally, we saw a commitment to climate justice and equity, made real through an ethics of self-care, people-care, and Earth repair, deeply aware of the need for compassion and an expanded sense of climate justice and security. Our recommendation is that those taking local action prioritise accountability and allyship with those 'least responsible, but most vulnerable' who, locally, national, or globally, have inadvertently found themselves on the frontline of the triple climate–nature–social emergencies. In particular, a key priority is to address the whiteness of the climate movement, specifically by promoting marginalised and non-white voices to positions of leadership.

6. Conclusions

We want to end by suggesting that there is the possibility of a novel kind of place-based agency that combines the themes identified in this paper: supporting a broader definition of the climate emergency, developing progressive politics and strategy, and supporting values-based climate justice and equity. We are not advocating for a new breed of climate activists, but a novel kind of local actor that transcends traditional institutional identities and boundaries. Established civic personas mobilised during moments of conflict might start to help understanding here [91]. Significantly, we stress the need for learning and acting in a broader group dynamic, rather than acting alone as heroic individuals. Collective agency is more equipped to deal with the climate emergency as it is responsive to lived experience, promotes an ethics of care and repair, and can grasp and act on multiple emergencies rather than focusing narrowly on carbon reduction. We contend

that this kind of collective agency could become much more widespread, not just as actual emergencies unfold, but as part of conscious attempts to learn new skills and insights to build alternatives.

Due to the size and scale of this research, there are several limitations, which also open opportunities for further study. These include testing findings in other places, especially the Majority world; broadening the scope to other civic actors, especially the business community; and exploring changes over time in terms of meanings and action on the climate emergency. Our findings, therefore, are emergent potentials rather than fully formed realities. Much more patient learning and acting is required to scale and influence place-based politics and strategies in the kinds of directions we have suggested. More significantly, our findings and experience demonstrate that the climate movement needs to address the continuing and deeply problematic whiteness of environmental politics that dismisses, tokenises or excludes people of colour from climate emergency action.

Nevertheless, given the scale of the challenges global and local society face, academics, activists, and policy makers alike need to come together and embrace this opportunity to create a broader sense of preparedness located in collective processes of (un)learning; identifying the structural origins of this emergency context we find ourselves in; caring for ourselves, each other, and the planet; organising in new ways; and foregrounding solidarity and allyship with frontline communities. This work offers a continued invitation for students and researchers to go beyond this 'emergency mode', drawing on the contributions in this paper for ideas and action. The coming decade could induce panic and powerlessness, blame, and defeatism. But it does not have to be this way. It can also push us towards empowering collective action based on hope and imagination and the implementation of local practical solutions that improve daily life for the majority.

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