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COP26 - An Introduction to the UN Conference of the Parties

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This briefing provides an introduction to COP26 and the treaties and agreements that underpin the negotiations due to take place in Glasgow in November 2021. Additionally, it explains the link between this COP on climate change (COP26) and the inter-related COP on biodiversity (COP15), due to take place in October 2021.



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Summary

COP26 is a global United Nations summit about climate change and how countries are planning to tackle and adapt to it.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) seeks to “stabilize greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system”. It has been ratified by 196 States (including the UK) which constitute the “Parties” to the Convention, and meet annually in a Conference of the Parties (COP).

In November 2021, the 26th United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP26) will take place in Glasgow. COP26 is the most important gathering on climate change since the Paris COP in 2015, with the talks widely considered to be the last opportunity to deliver on commitments to keep global temperature rise to within 1.5 – 2°C. COP26 also offers a crucial opportunity to address how a just, resilient and green recovery from Covid-19 is delivered. To achieve this temperature goal, GHG emissions must be reduced by all parties across all sectors of society and the economy.

The UNFCCC was one of two major outcomes of the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro. The other was the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). These Rio Conventions underpin international efforts to tackle what is frequently referred to as the “twin crises” of climate change and biodiversity loss. Alongside COP26, there will also be a COP on the CBD held in China in October 2021 (COP15) where a new biodiversity framework is expected to be adopted. It is widely recognised that climate change and biodiversity loss cannot be solved in isolation, and that they are not solely environmental issues but development, economic, social, security, equity and moral issues as well.

A key priority for COP26 is full implementation of the 2015 Paris Agreement, which requires all parties to prepare, communicate and maintain national GHG reduction targets. Known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) these should set out each party’s efforts to reduce national emissions. NDCs are expected to show a progressive reduction in GHGs, known as the “ratchet mechanism”. Tangible progress towards climate change adaptation is also a priority, as is delivering US\$100 billion per year for climate action in developing countries. For the UK it is also a significant test of its new role in the world after leaving the EU.

Many parties have yet to set out adequate emission cuts within their NDCs to keep global warming within “safe” limits. Because global temperature rise is driven by cumulative emissions over time, immediate reductions of GHGs are considered to be essential. Both the Scottish and UK Governments have made commitments to reduce emissions to net-zero by 2045 and 2050 respectively. Net-zero means a balance between emissions by source (e.g. transport and agriculture) and removals by sinks (e.g. trees and peat). Net-zero is the state at which our contribution to global warming stops.

The UK's Alok Sharma MP is President Designate of COP26, and his main role is to use leverage and diplomacy to persuade more nations to set ambitious near and long term targets. This is a formidable challenge, not least because of the severe limitations placed on diplomatic capacity, global finances and timescales due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Three years of negotiation and preparation preceded the successful Paris COP.

The Scottish Government has undertaken to deliver a "safe, secure and successful event in Scotland" and to play "its full part in securing an ambitious and deliverable global deal". For Glasgow, the ambition is to sell the city "to the world as a leader in the race to net zero and a place where green business can be done".

Clear priorities and a negotiating agenda for the summit are not expected to be published until after preliminary meetings in June, therefore it is difficult to set objective criteria against which to benchmark success. The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee considers that COP26 will not be considered a success unless as ambitious a set of NDCs as possible are secured, alongside an equally ambitious green finance package, and help to build resilience to the impacts of climate change.

Parliaments have a critical and ever-increasing role to play in these global emergencies – effective law making, scrutiny and budget approval is imperative in ensuring that targets and commitments made by governments are delivered.

The Scottish Parliament will host an International Legislators' Summit to discuss the climate emergency during COP26. Parliamentarians from around the world will convene to discuss "accelerating climate action and delivering a green, fair and resilient recovery". Further events are also planned at the summit itself.

Introduction

From the 1st - 12th November 2021 up to 30,000 delegates and 200 world leaders are expected to attend the 26th United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow (due to Covid-19, postponed from 2020), which is set to be the largest political summit the UK has ever hosted. At the beginning of that meeting, the [UK will assume the Presidency of the COP, in partnership with Italy](#).

This briefing provides an introduction to COP26 and the treaties and agreements that underpin the negotiations. A further COP, on biodiversity (COP15), is also scheduled to take place this year and [the connections between the two COPs are also explored](#). Next year, the [United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification will also hold a COP](#), with a venue yet to be decided.

[Key priorities for COP26](#) include full implementation of the [Paris Agreement from COP15](#), tangible progress towards climate change adaptation, and delivering on the COP15 goal of mobilising US\$100 billion per year for climate action in developing countries. US climate envoy John Kerry has described the summit as "the last best chance" to avert the worst environmental consequences for the world, and the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres recently reiterated that success "rests on achieving a breakthrough on adaptation and finance"^{2 3}.

For the UK it is also a significant test of its new role in the world after leaving the EU⁴. Professor Anand Menon notes that "clarity of vision" and the "ability to make difficult choices" will be crucial for the negotiations, and that they present "a golden opportunity to establish the UK as a continuing big player in global climate diplomacy in its own right". However⁵:

“ [...] addressing the climate crisis [is] the work of decades. Success is not a question of quick political ‘wins’, but requires sticking power. For partly understandable reasons related to the pandemic, this is not a Government that has, as yet, shown an aptitude for thinking beyond the short term. If it is genuine about its environmental aspirations, however, it must.”

The Scottish Government considers that the negotiations offer a "unique opportunity for Scotland to put progress towards decarbonisation at the forefront of people's thinking", and that this will be "a critical moment in the global fight against climate change"⁶.

COP26 - Framework

COP26 is a global United Nations summit about climate change and how countries are planning to tackle and adapt to it.

The [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC) was adopted in 1992. It has been ratified by 196 States (including the UK) which constitute the “Parties” to the Convention. The objective of the Treaty is to “stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent [dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system](#)”^{7 i}.

Every year a Conference of the Parties takes place (known as COPs), with this year's being the 26th meeting. The Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit has set out a [useful history of COPs from Berlin in 1995 to Glasgow in 2021](#).

There are three broad categories of attendees permitted at these conferences. These are representatives of Parties to the Convention and Observer States, members of the press and media, and representatives of observer organisations such as environmental non-governmental organisations or business groups⁸. At COP25 in Madrid, there were almost 27,000 registered participants, with nearly 14,000 from specific parties, 10,000 from observer organisations and 3000 journalists⁹.

The UNFCCC is guided by scientific assessments from the [Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC) which brings together scientists from across the world to comprehensively assess the latest climate science. In 2018 the IPCC produced a [special report on keeping global temperature rise to 1.5°C](#). This showed the significant difference between a 1.5°C rise and a rise of 2°C, and the dramatic risk of exceeding these goals. It found that to keep temperature rise to 1.5°C [global emissions needed to fall to "net zero" by around 2050](#). The report noted that climate impacts are already being observed on land and ocean ecosystems, and the services they provide, and that¹⁰:

“ Temperature rise to date has already resulted in profound alterations to human and natural systems, bringing increases in some types of extreme weather, droughts, floods, sea level rise and biodiversity loss, and causing unprecedented risks to vulnerable persons and populations.”

COP26 is the most important gathering on climate change since the Paris COP in 2015, with the talks widely considered to be the last opportunity to deliver on commitments to keep global temperature rise to within 1.5 – 2°C. COP26 also offers a crucial opportunity to address how a [just, resilient and green recovery from Covid-19](#) is delivered¹¹.

i The release of greenhouse gases (GHG) is causing global temperatures to rise and long-term changes in our climate. The main GHGs are carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane, nitrous oxide, and fluorinated gases. As a basket of GHGs, these gases are often referred to just as CO₂ or CO₂ equivalent (CO₂e).

The Paris Agreement

The 2015 conference in Paris (COP21) was the largest gathering of world leaders in history, and led to the adoption of a new global accord on tackling climate change. The UNFCCC states ¹² :

“ The Paris Agreement’s central aim is to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius.”

The **central mechanism for achieving this temperature goal is reducing greenhouse gas emissions**, and the Paris Agreement requires all parties to prepare, communicate and maintain their own national targets for doing so by 2030, reviewed globally every 5 years to assess collective progress and to inform further actions. These **Nationally Determined Contributions** ⁱⁱ (NDCs), are to set out each party’s efforts to reduce national emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change. They are expected to "represent a progression beyond the previous one and reflect the highest possible ambition". This progressive reduction in emissions to achieve agreed targets is known as the "ratchet mechanism". The Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU) states ¹¹ :

“ In essence, every five years governments will review their commitments and, if the science indicates, upgrade them. The Glasgow summit is the first turn of the ratchet. [...] The next turn of the ratchet comes in 2025; and if emissions continue to rise 2020-2025, it may become impossible to meet the 1.5°C global warming target, and perhaps the ‘well below 2°C’ target as well.”

Some of the key aspects of the Agreement, additional to the overarching temperature goal and the ratchet mechanism, are ¹² :

- **Global peaking and climate neutrality:** To achieve the temperature goal, global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions should peak as soon as possible, recognising that this will take longer for developing countries, so as to achieve net -zero emissions ⁱⁱⁱ by mid-century.
- **Net Zero emissions is needed to prevent additional warming:** To stabilise the global temperature emissions must fall until there is a balance between sources of emissions and sinks (natural or engineered processes that take up CO₂ from the atmosphere).
- **Sinks and reservoirs:** Parties are encouraged to conserve and enhance sinks and reservoirs of GHGs e.g. trees, peatland and wetlands.
- **Adaptation:** National adaptation efforts to be significantly enhanced, resilience strengthened and vulnerability to climate change to be reduced e.g. in relation to

ii Scotland is part of the UK, and therefore cannot formally submit an NDC, however [the Scottish Government has undertaken to publish an indicative one](#) in the near future, which will centre on “Scotland’s world-leading target to reduce emissions by 75% by 2030”.

iii A balance between emissions by source (e.g. transport and agriculture) and removals by sinks (e.g. trees and peat). Net-zero is the state at which our contribution to global warming stops ¹³ .

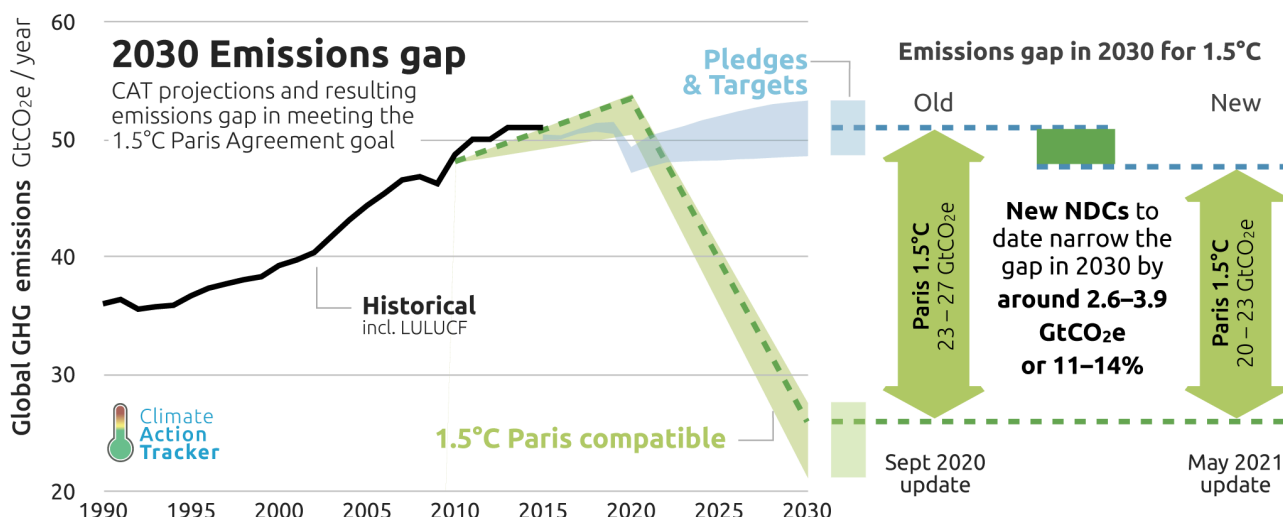
flooding, heatwave or other climate induced impacts. National Adaptation Plans should be formulated, implemented, communicated and updated. The adaptation efforts of developing countries should also be recognised.

- **Loss and damage:** The importance of averting, minimising and addressing harms from sudden disasters (e.g. cyclones) as well as slow-onset processes (e.g. sea level rise) is recognised, as is the role of **sustainable development** in reducing these risks.
- **Finance, technology and capacity-building support:** The obligations of developed countries to support developing ones to "build clean, climate-resilient futures" is reaffirmed.
- **Climate change education, training, public awareness, public participation and public access to information** is to be enhanced.
- **Transparency, implementation and compliance:** Robust transparency and accounting is fundamentally important. In addition to reporting on mitigation, adaptation and support, information undergoes international technical expert review.
- **Global Stocktake:** An assessment of collective progress is to take place in 2023 and every 5 years thereafter. Based on the best available science and long-term global climate goals, it will inform ongoing actions and enhance international cooperation.

Many parties to the Paris Agreement have yet to set out adequate emission cuts to keep global warming within "safe" limits. Therefore, COP26 is the first time signatories are due to upgrade their targets, and to go some way towards bridging the gap between pledges and delivery.

Figure 1 shows global emissions trends from 1990, and the scale of change required by 2030 to meet the 1.5°C temperature goal ^{iv v}:

Figure 1: Climate Action Tracker (CAT) 2030 Emissions Gap



Climate Action Tracker, 2021¹⁴

^{iv} To enable consistent reporting of total GHG emissions, the four main greenhouse gases are weighted by their global warming potential and expressed in units of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e).

^v LULUCF refers to land use, land use change and forestry.

International Net Zero commitments and the 1.5°C Target

The COP26 Universities Network, a group of more than 50 UK-based universities, states ¹⁵ :

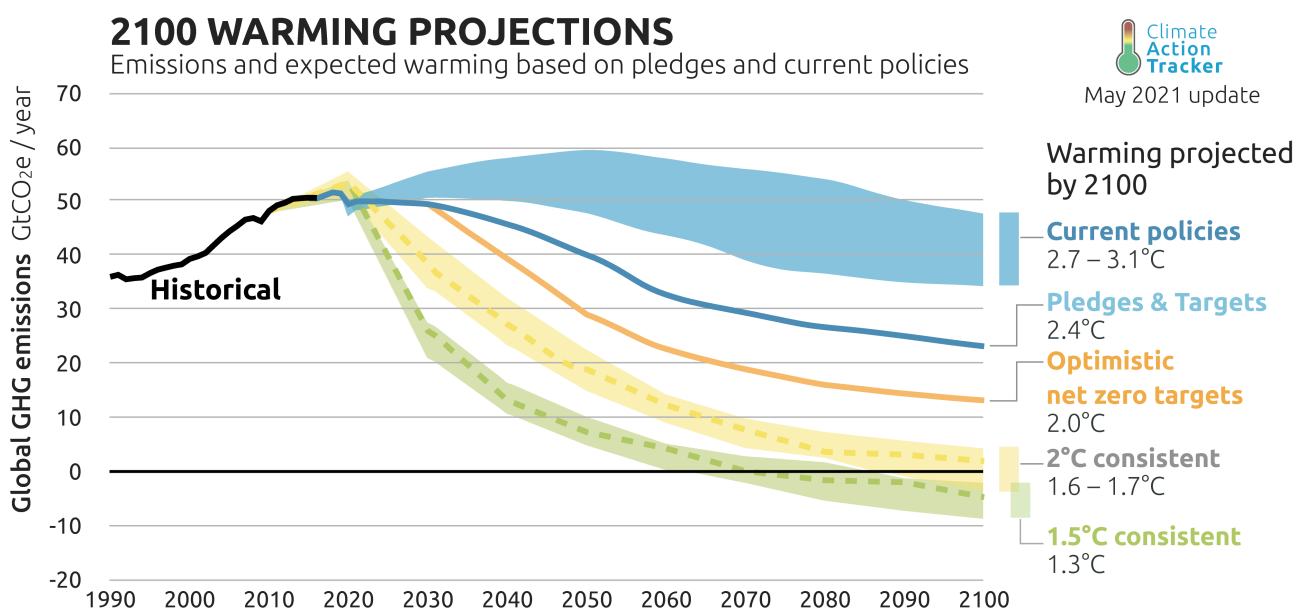
“ Stopping CO₂ emissions from causing global warming is a minimum requirement for halting total human-induced warming. This requires a global balance between CO₂ emissions and CO₂ removal (i.e. ‘net zero’ CO₂ emissions); also known as ‘carbon neutrality’. This balance must be sustainable, permanent and resilient to climate change.”

The COP26 Universities Network also highlights that immediate reductions of GHG emissions are essential, as global temperature rise is driven by cumulative emissions over time. Reductions in emissions at source (as opposed to offsets and removals) should form the bulk of action, and individual net zero targets and the pathways to achieve them should be driven by considerations of responsibility and capacity. To reflect their equity obligations under the Paris Agreement, industrialised nations should, as a matter of best practice, consider setting targets for delivering net zero before 2050 ¹⁵ .

Following advice from independent advisers the [Climate Change Committee](#), both the [Scottish and UK Governments have made commitments](#) to reduce emissions to net-zero by 2045 and 2050 respectively. Many national governments, regional, local and city governments, businesses, universities and third sector organisations have also already set relevant target dates in policy or in law.

Without such net-zero commitments, and swift, tangible action to achieve them, global warming projections to the end of the century could see warming of between 4-5°C, as shown in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: 2100 Warming Projections



Climate Action Tracker, 2021¹⁶

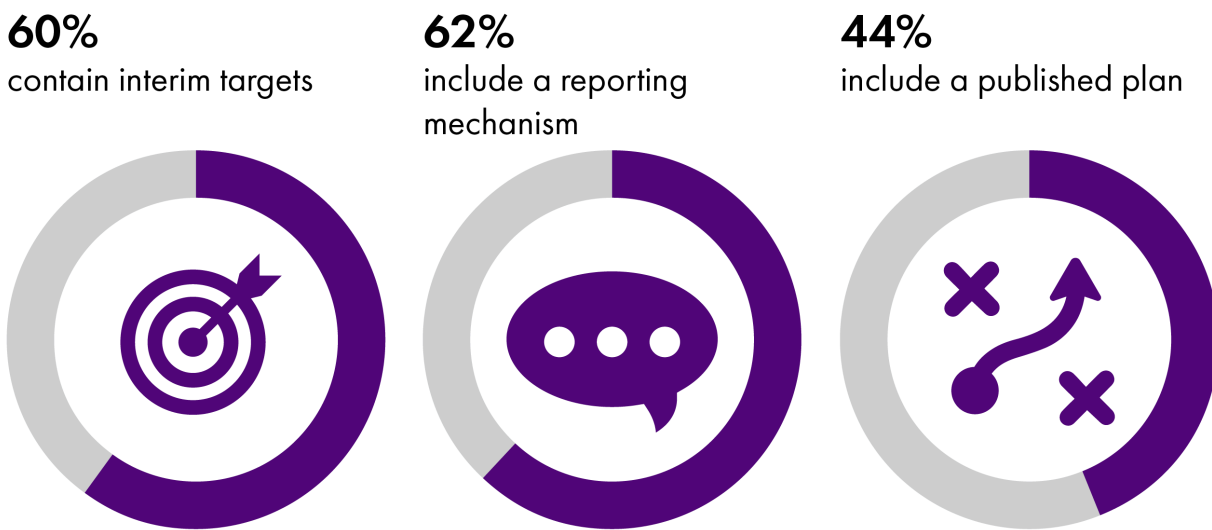
The ECIU provides [a useful net-zero tracker](#), which shows the state of development of net-zero legislation or policy commitments. To date, Sweden, UK, France, Denmark, New Zealand, and Hungary have legal obligations in place, with proposed legislation in the EU and a further five countries including Canada, South Korea and Spain. A further 20 countries have made policy commitments (including the US for 2050 and China for 2060), with the remainder lagging ¹⁷ .

Oxford Net Zero, an interdisciplinary research initiative based at the University of Oxford, has carried out a Stocktake of Global Net Zero Progress and found that countries with net zero targets together represent 61% of global emissions and 52% of the global population, they state that ¹⁸ :

“ [...] net zero commitments vary hugely in their quality. While 20% of existing net zero targets already meet a certain minimum set of robustness criteria, or ‘starting line’, as set out by the [UN Race to Zero Campaign](#) , this leaves significantly more work to be done by governments and business leaders in the months leading up to the UN Climate summit in Glasgow.”

Of these existing targets, 60% contain interim targets, 62% include a reporting mechanism, and 44% include a published plan. Scotland and the UK comply with these criteria. Figure 3 sets these out:

Figure 3: Assessment of International Net Zero Commitments



Adapted from [Oxford Net Zero's Stocktake of Global Net Zero Progress](#) Oxford Net Zero, 2021¹⁸

The road to the UK's Presidency of COP26

The UK's President Designate of COP26 is [Alok Sharma MP](#). In short, the UK's role is to use leverage and diplomacy to persuade more nations to set ambitious near and long term targets (NDCs) in the run-up to the Glasgow conference, this will be done along with its partner Italy, and Chile (which holds the UNFCCC Presidency until the Glasgow summit)¹⁹.

As previously noted, an encouraging number of net zero targets are being set by governments, businesses and others, and COP26 is widely considered to be an opportunity for more commitments to be made, and for ensuring that targets are backed up by plans for delivery¹⁵.

In their recent report [A climate for ambition: Diplomatic preparations for COP26](#), the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee noted that [Britain's Presidency of the G7, Italy's Chair of the G20](#)^{vi} and the election of US President Biden could allow for transformational diplomacy. The Committee stated²⁰:

“ This year will only be successful for British diplomacy if the G7 and COP are seen as part of a joint engagement. Both presidencies can be used to show that environmental agendas are not in competition with, but complement, economic growth, health, development and security policies, and can become an integrated part of a national strategy. [...] With covid overshadowing and disrupting international progress on climate change, there is also a chance for more radical thinking. The way we trade, travel and interact is so different from only 18 months ago that we must rethink the traditional diplomatic jamboree. The lessons of the pandemic offer a way of turning away from airmiles and onto airwaves, especially when discussing the climate emergency.”

Many important technical issues relating to how countries will make the Paris Agreement work (known as the Paris Rulebook) have also still to be solved. At the most recent COP (Madrid 2019), there were heated arguments about the role of international carbon trading^{vii} and transparency over whether countries are carrying out their pledges. These issues are still outstanding, and it is hoped that [a meeting in June in Bonn](#) will resolve them and lay the grounds for a successful summit in November. Without progress in June, a positive outcome in November is considered by some to be unlikely^{21 22}.

Underlining the need for progress, the UK has recently raised the possibility of an additional meeting before COP26²¹. Most recently, [President Biden's Leaders Summit on Climate](#) has led to further commitments from the US to reduce its emissions by 50 -52% by 2030, with similar commitments from Japan and Canada. Partnerships with Denmark, Canada, Norway, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to develop new technologies were also announced. The US President's [proposed \\$2.3 trillion infrastructure package](#) is considered to be vital to achieving their emissions target; it is subject to approval by Congress.

vi The G7 Meeting is 11-13 June in Cornwall. The G20 Meeting is 30-31 October in Rome.
vii Buying and selling carbon credits rather than reducing emissions at source

Role of the Presidency - setting the agenda

The recent history of climate talks has been fraught with difficulty. Brazil was due to preside over and host COP25 in 2019, however President Jair Bolsonaro, a climate sceptic, withdrew the offer soon after taking office^{23 24}. Chile then stepped in to take on the presidency and to act as host before pulling out of hosting due to civil unrest. Chile retained the presidency, and the conference was finally held in Madrid, where talks were "fraught", and "unable to reach consensus in many areas", pushing decisions into the following year (2020) when negotiations were postponed to 2021 due to Covid-19^{25 22}.

These events apply added pressure onto the UK, where ahead of the COP, the President Designate sets the agenda for the summit, and drives ambition internationally. The negotiations timetable will be set by the UK, as President of COP26, working in consultation and with support from the [UNFCCC Secretariat](#), who also help to manage the meeting. This is expected to be informed by [meetings in Bonn in June](#), with details of the timetable for high level and public events announced by the UK Government thereafter²⁰.

At the summit, the President will lead the formal negotiations and have oversight of the overall COP package and vision, including political declarations²⁶. The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee notes the "formidable challenge over the next few months to persuade nations to commit to more ambitious climate pledges, while also seeking to broker agreements on rules for a global carbon market and on the financing issues that were left unresolved at previous summits" and states²⁰:

“ The role of host and President is critical in the lead up to a COP summit. The host must effectively lead informal diplomatic negotiations in advance of the meeting, and broker agreements during the conference itself.”

[Professor Nicholas Stern](#), one of the world's leading climate economists, on the achievement of the 2015 Paris Agreement stated that²⁷:

“ France has brought openness and experience in diplomacy, and mutual respect to these talks. They have taken great care to make everyone listened to, that they were consulted. There was a great sense of openness, of professional diplomacy, and skill.”

The role of French diplomats in 2015 is further analysed by [Nick Chan](#), an academic and adviser to Pacific island states at COP21, who notes the significant diplomatic effort that went into building trust and confidence with China, India and Saudi Arabia, and details "an interesting and curious feature of [the] UNFCCC intergovernmental negotiating process, where the conference host holds a privileged and pivotal political position in directing the final outcome of the meeting". It is not parties to the UNFCCC who ultimately draft and write the final outcomes, but the President and conference host, who is then responsible for producing proposals that serve as final compromises acceptable to all, presented as a package; this 'authority to propose' is a distinct agenda-setting power, for example²⁸:

“ None of the three iterations of the draft Paris Agreement presented by the French during the final week were 'put on the screen' for a line-by-line resolution of brackets and options. Instead, after comments aired and further revisions suggested by parties, returned to the black box of the French presidency to make the judgement about what to change, and presented afresh for further rinse-and-repeating.”

The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee contrasts French preparations with UK ones ²⁰ :

“ The French Government had three years to prepare for COP21 and devoted the resources of its foreign ministry. The UK has had a much shorter lead time to prepare for COP26: it was only awarded the presidency in September 2019, and the global focus on covid-19 and the vaccine competition that has followed, have severely disrupted plans and even delayed the Summit by a year.”

In oral evidence to the Committee, Laurence Tubiana, France’s former Climate Change Ambassador and Special Representative for COP21 who steered the diplomatic effort stated that “by the beginning of the summer the COP President should have set out what he wants to achieve at the conference, almost drafting the press communiqué that he wants to get out of Glasgow”. The Committee therefore stressed that due to the number of parties and negotiators, “designing a plan and sharing it far ahead of the COP is the best way to increase convergence and shape expectations” ²⁰ .

There is a danger that COP26 could be portrayed as the point when climate change will be solved once and for all. In truth, responsibility for adapting to and mitigating climate change will be the work of many future generations ²⁹ . The UK’s responsibility as COP President does not end when COP26 concludes, but when COP27, which will be hosted by an African nation, commences. The UK will therefore need to continue to champion action on climate change domestically and internationally for decades to come to help ensure a successful legacy for Glasgow. The UK Government’s Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, describes their vision for the UK’s role in the world to 2030. It makes a continuing commitment to tackling climate change and biodiversity loss and to integrating this as a priority throughout the UK’s foreign policy ³⁰ .

Covid and the COP

There are still significant hurdles to overcome in advance of November’s summit. Not least whether the meeting should physically take place in Glasgow due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the possibility of new variants, and delayed or slow vaccine roll-outs ^{21 31 32} .

A physical meeting is still the UK’s preferred option, and it will be for the host nation to decide (in partnership with the UN) whether COP26 goes ahead in full, is delayed, or takes place in a virtual format. The Scottish Government, Glasgow City Council and Police Scotland also have significant roles as **domestic hosts** in relation to delivering infrastructure at the conference site, public health and the safety of citizens and delegates ²¹ .

There have been calls for a hybrid meeting (or to prepare for one, as a worst case scenario), with many of the side events taking place online and with slimmed down teams of negotiators taking part in person, however many of the countries with the highest rate of Covid-19 infections and weakest response will also be those most affected by climate change, and to limit their voices at negotiations which seek to mitigate the impacts of one global catastrophe due to another is neither just nor inclusive ^{21 31 32 20} .

Great Thunberg, the Swedish climate activist, has indicated that she will not attend COP26

and believes that the conference should be postponed because of concerns about the impact of the pandemic on attendance. She states that "the best thing to do would be to get everyone vaccinated as soon as possible so that everyone could take part on the same terms" ³³ .

Key priorities

In June 2020, the UK's President Designate of COP26 Alok Sharma MP announced five broad summit themes: clean energy; clean transport; nature-based solutions; adaptation and finance ³⁴ .

Subsequently, in March 2021, the Government set out the following headline objectives ²⁰ :

- To encourage countries to submit more ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions.
- To protect and help adapt our communities.
- To meet the US\$100 billion goal for climate finance.
- To close off the outstanding elements of the Paris Agreement.

A recent report by the House of Commons Business Energy and Industrial Skills Committee recommended that the Government's headline ambitions should "be expanded to a clear list of measures, with a set of criteria attached to each in terms of how success will be measured" ³⁵ .

On 12 April 2021, Alok Sharma wrote to all parties of the UNFCCC recognising the "clear unity of purpose" and "specific priorities" that have repeatedly been referenced in his discussions. He also noted the "unprecedented negotiations agenda, incorporating unresolved issues from COP25", including ³⁶ :

- **Full implementation of the Paris Agreement** from COP15 including adopting common timeframes for action as well as transparency on action.
- Demonstrating **tangible progress towards climate change adaptation**, including a significant increase in adaptation finance.
- Delivering on the **Paris goal of mobilising US\$100 billion per year by 2020** for climate action in developing countries.
- Ensuring that COP26 **takes into account and responds to any gap between the collective impact of Nationally Determined Contributions and what is required to limit global temperature rise to within 1.5 – 2°C.**
- Agreeing a programme of work on Action for Climate Empowerment (including a Gender Action Plan) and **improved partnership working to enhance collaboration between governments and other stakeholders to enable and accelerate universal action.**

[Professor Simon Lewis](#) recently noted that there wasn't a "clear plan for what COP26 should do", asked why health and agriculture are not included in the UK Government's summit themes, and warned that the "bitter "global south versus global north"^{viii} acrimony of past summits" could erupt ⁴ .

Coalitions for climate

As previously noted, there are still concerns over whether the conference can take place fully in person. The recent Covid-19 outbreak amongst the Indian delegation to pre-G7 talks in the UK has highlighted the potential for further infection, and with 196 countries represented at COP26, the risks remain high ³⁸ .

UNFCCC decisions require complete consensus of agreement by all parties, not just a majority. However the conference proceeds, it is widely recognised that engagement with and input from developing nations and those most affected by climate change will be crucial. The ECIU notes that "not all nations pack diplomatic punch", and they have in the past chosen to negotiate in larger blocs, for example ³⁹ :

- **Alliance of Small Island States** - A group of 39 island and low-lying coastal developing states that are susceptible to climate change, especially sea level rise.
- **Least Developed Countries Group** - A 48 strong group of the world's poorest nations that are already bearing the brunt of climate impacts, yet have done the least to cause the problem.
- **African Group** - 54 African member nations.
- **G77 + China** - Developing and middle income nations.
- **Coalition for Rainforest Nations** - 53 nations in Americas/Africa/Asia that wish to reconcile forest stewardship with development.

Negotiating in blocs has been successful in the past, for example work by the Alliance of Small Island States led to the inclusion of the 1.5°C temperature goal in the Paris Agreement.

Previous COPs have also seen the development of new coalitions and initiatives to speed decarbonisation in specific areas such as [solar power](#), [innovation](#), and [financial disclosure](#). The ECIU notes that COP26 could see new initiatives and coalitions in areas including ¹¹ :

- [Nature-based solutions](#) – conserving and restoring forests and other ecosystems that absorb and store carbon, and which can also make communities and nature more resilient to climate impacts.
- Clean growth – extending the reach of the [Powering Past Coal Alliance](#), and/or starting new initiatives in areas such as renewables, energy storage or industrial decarbonisation.

viii The phrase "Global South" refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. It is one of a group of terms that refers to regions outside Europe and North America, mostly low-income and often politically or culturally marginalised ³⁷ .

- Moving money in the City of London, which currently [brokers about 15% of the world's fossil fuel finance](#), into clean energy.

The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee noted that ²⁰ :

“ The UK has a strong record for building coalitions for climate action [...] The UK Government should look to build overlapping circles of interest to build support for change and to drive forward global ambition. Building on partnerships that may be temporary, the UK should enable with staff support, though not always lead, groups of low-lying states, island nations, developing economies, high ambition states, and vulnerable country groups, amongst others, building on the work of the Small Island Developing States. [...] The UK's Presidency should be viewed as organisational and enabling.”

Dear Green Place - the host city

As [previously noted](#) the Scottish Government, Glasgow City Council and Police Scotland have significant roles as domestic hosts in relation to delivering infrastructure at the conference site, public health and the safety of citizens and delegates ²¹ .

The Scottish Government has two key themes and four aims for COP26. Key themes are People and a [Just Transition](#), and the four aims are ⁴⁰ :

- A safe, secure and successful event in Scotland.
- Scotland plays its full part in securing an ambitious and deliverable global deal at COP26.
- COP26 fully contributes to Scotland meeting Net Zero through a Just Transition.
- COP26 enhances Scotland's place in the world and attracts innovation, investment and builds even more effective partnerships that bring benefit to Scotland, our people and our goals.

Glasgow City Council states that ⁴¹ :

“ COP26 is the latest major event to be hosted in Glasgow, which has a proven track record as a world-class host of global sporting championships, cultural events and conferences. With the support of businesses and residents, we can help ensure the city is safe and ready to welcome visitors.”

There are two clear zones which host key events. The [Blue Zone at the Scottish Event Campus](#) is where the main negotiations will take place. The City Council states that the Green Zone ⁴¹ :

“ [...] is where the civic society and businesses will have their voices heard through events, exhibitions and workshops, promoting discussion, awareness and education in relation to fighting climate change. It is also an opportunity for the host country to showcase its innovative projects and technologies.”

Furthermore ⁴² :

“ As Host City, our ambition is to create a hub that allows for us to reach out to other cities, city networks and sub-national groupings, sell Glasgow to the world as a leader in the race to net zero and a place where green business can be done [...] We are currently having a number of discussions with key event and city stakeholders about how we develop a host city events programme that engages city partners, maximises stakeholder opportunities and enhances the 'COP City' feel that we want to achieve.”

The Council's website [GetReadyGlasgow](#) will provide relevant updates in the run up to and through the summit.

In a (February 2021) letter to the Scottish Parliament's Justice Sub-Committee on Policing, Police Scotland highlighted that the COP26 conference “is likely to be one of the largest policing operations in UK policing history”. The letter also set out details of ongoing discussions with the Cabinet Office on funding for the operation ⁴³ :

“ With regards to the financial aspect of the policing element of the Conference, work continues with the Chief Financial Officer to develop a memorandum of understanding between Police Scotland and the UK Government, which ensures the policing of the Conference will not be detrimental to the Police Scotland budget, either directly or indirectly. This is a principle that was established with the Cabinet Office one year ago.”

Success?

Until the UK Presidency sets out clear priorities and a negotiating agenda for COP26 it is difficult to set objective criteria against which to benchmark success, or otherwise. The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee considers that securing as ambitious a set of Nationally Determined Contributions as possible will be the key goal for the Presidency, and that it will be “the key metric against which success is measured, not just of the COP event, but of the UK’s diplomatic capability” ²⁰ .

As previously noted, a recent report by the House of Commons Business Energy and Industrial Skills Committee recommended that the Government’s headline ambitions should “be expanded to a clear list of measures, with a set of criteria attached to each in terms of how success will be measured” ³⁵ .

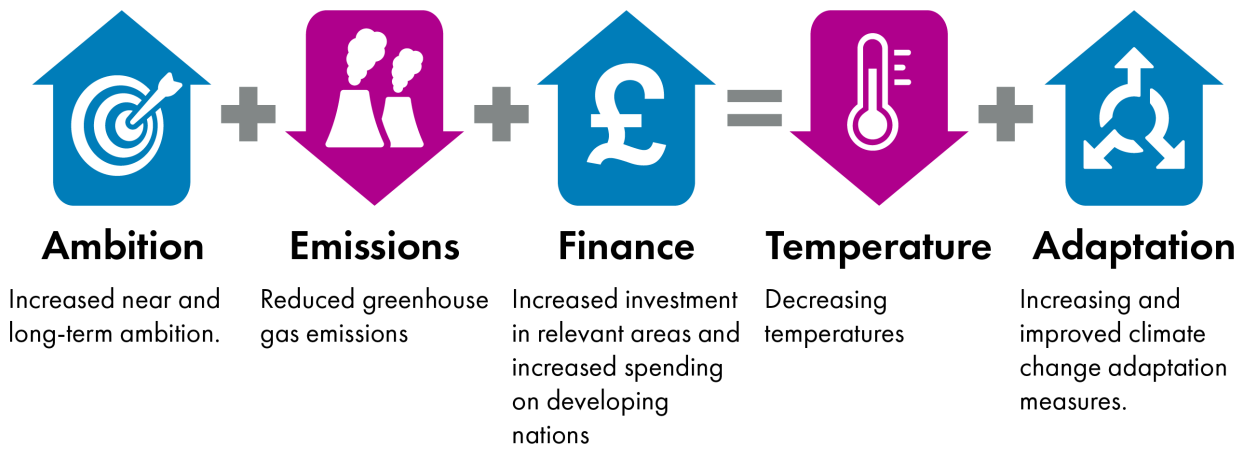
The ECIU asks “what does a successful COP look like?” and states ³⁹ :

“ In practical terms, it's one that kick-starts decarbonisation on the timescale set out by science and the Paris Agreement, and where promises made to the poorest, most vulnerable nations are delivered in full. In Paris, COP21 was a success because the nations with most at stake said it was a success.”

Figure 4 sets out the challenge:

Figure 4: COP26 Challenges

COP26 and future COPs have to negotiate this challenge



Adapted from [COP26 A Visual Guide](#) Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit, 2021³⁹

The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee concludes that "COP26 will not be considered a success unless the UK Presidency sets the world on a path to net zero, secures an ambitious green finance package, and helps to build resilience to the impacts of climate change". The Committee welcomes the UK Government's headline objectives for the conference, but notes that²⁰ :

“ [...] beyond this announcement there has been little detail on what the UK Government wants to achieve. Setting ambitious expectations will be crucial to securing the success of the conference and the Government will need to do more than just set out broad ambitions. We recommend that the Government ensures that the process for setting objectives for COP26 is inclusive and incorporates the views of the Least Developed Countries and the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. We recommend that before the beginning of the G7 conference in June, the Government expands its headline objectives into a clear list of targets that the UK Presidency wants to achieve in Glasgow. Using the two events together to mobilise support will give a greater opportunity for success.”

Climate finance - \$100bn a year by 2020

At the Copenhagen summit in 2009 (COP15), developed nations pledged **\$100bn per annum by 2020** to help poorer countries to decarbonise their economies and to adapt to the impacts of climate change. This pledge was re-affirmed in Paris six years later.

This \$100bn is supposed to be "new and additional" finance, but has been \$20-50bn below commitment every year to date. It is not supposed to replace overseas development aid, and can be public or private investment^{4 44}. Professor Simon Lewis states⁴ :

“ A new financial package requires funding for the future – the energy transition and adapting our societies as the climate changes – as well as turning off the financial taps to fossil fuel extraction and use. Given Covid-19 impacts, debt relief for income-poor countries is essential, so that they can increasingly fund their own net-zero future. Without this, and even more money on the table, climate catastrophe beckons. ”

This funding package is considered to be essential for securing support from global south countries, and many of the emissions reduction pledges in their NDCs are predicated on this support. It will have to be finalised at pre-COP26 meetings, and include clear commitments and mechanisms for annual delivery. As the ECIU notes, "money unlocks emission cuts", furthermore¹¹ :

“ The UK has consistently been a relatively ‘good performer’ in climate finance, and its role is to ensure sufficient international ‘push’ on developed country governments that the money issue is not side-lined.”

The UN's Independent Expert Group on Climate Finance recently concluded that the \$100 billion per year by 2020 commitment plays an essential role in maintaining and encouraging greater ambition, and that⁴⁵ :

- Both the Covid-19 and climate crises must be tackled simultaneously. They are inherently global in nature and will require coordinated global responses. This represents an enormous challenge but also a one-off, last-chance opportunity to restructure economies at the pace and scale that the climate crisis requires.
- A new climate economy must be urgently built – one that escapes a 20th century growth model based on fossil fuel dependence and the degradation of natural capital – that can deliver a net zero carbon world by 2050. To achieve this a major global boost in investment is needed, notably for addressing infrastructure deficits, supporting energy transitions, and building climate resilience in emerging markets and developing economies.

The Expert Group states that⁴⁵ :

“ There have so far been no forward-looking commitments from most donors. Maintaining and strengthening climate finance commitments in the current fiscal circumstances will be challenging for developed countries and require political will, as well as improved coordination. The additional amounts that are called for are modest in relation to the scale of financing being deployed by developed countries on their own stimulus packages. Supporting strong climate action in developing countries at this juncture will enable developing countries to raise their ambition on climate action that will be critical to meeting the collective net zero target by 2050 and of benefit to the whole world economy.”

UK and Scottish Policy on climate change

Whilst climate change mitigation and adaptation policy is devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, it is the UK that is signatory and party to the UNFCCC and other international treaties.

Therefore, efforts in the devolved nations count within and towards the UK's [overarching international target to reach net-zero emissions by 2050](#), and the [recently submitted NDC to reduce emissions by at least 68% by 2030](#), compared to 1990 levels ^{46 47}.

The [Climate Change Act 2008](#) [as amended] provides the main legal framework in the UK for both mitigating and adapting to climate change. In brief, it requires that:

- Specified GHG emissions are reduced by a certain amount every five years (known as carbon budgets).
- An overall target of net zero emissions is reached by 2050^{ix}.
- The Government assesses and prepares for climate change risks and opportunities (such as flooding and impacts on ecosystems and agriculture).

This is the first time that the UK has presented an NDC outside of the EU. These commitments are considered to put further pressure on other major economies, such as China, Japan and South Korea, to present ambitious 2030 targets which commit them to near term action towards long-term net zero goals ⁴⁸.

UK action on reducing emissions largely focusses on decarbonising individual sectors such as power, industry, waste, buildings, transport and agriculture. The CCC's [latest Progress Report to the UK Parliament](#) noted that whilst some advances had been made in relation to setting headline goals, and a [Cabinet Committee](#) and [Treasury Funding Review](#) were ongoing, there were still gaps in relation to crucial sectoral policies e.g. for industry or hydrogen, woodland and peat, and transforming heating ⁴⁹. More recently, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee published a report on [Achieving Net Zero](#) and stated ⁵⁰:

“ Government lacks a plan for how it will achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 despite setting the target almost two years ago. At present, there is no coordinated plan with clear milestones towards achieving the target, making it difficult for Parliament and the general public to understand or scrutinise how the country is doing in its efforts to achieve net zero emissions. Government intends to publish a plethora of strategies this year setting out how it will reduce emissions in different sectors ranging from transport to the heating of buildings culminating in an overall net zero strategy.”

The [Climate Change \(Emissions Reduction Targets\) \(Scotland\) Act 2019](#) amends the [Climate Change \(Scotland\) Act 2009](#) and sets a GHG emissions reduction target (against a 1990 baseline) of net-zero emissions by 2045. This is in line with [advice from the CCC](#), is five years ahead of the UK target, and reflects Scotland's greater relative capacity to remove emissions than the UK as a whole, due to a larger land area per person and

ix The Act originally included an 80% emissions reduction target by 2050 which was increased to 100% in 2019.

significant carbon dioxide (the main GHG) storage potential through trees and peatland⁵¹. Interim targets have also been set for reductions of:

- 75% by 2030.
- 90% by 2040.

The 2009 Act also requires the Scottish Government to produce a plan setting out proposals and policies for meeting future emissions reduction targets. Known as the Climate Change Plan (CCP), it is published every five years and generally covers a 15 year timespan. The most recent CCP was published in 2018, and covers the period out to 2032. An [update to the most recent CCP sets out Scotland's path](#), across eight key sectors^x, to achieving a 75% reduction in emissions by 2030, and ultimately net-zero emissions by 2045. The update is a crucial staging post in Scotland's trajectory to net-zero, as it encompasses the interim 2030 target, which the CCC consider to be "extremely challenging"^{52 53}.

The Scottish Parliament's Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee led cross committee scrutiny of the update to the CCP, and in its report noted that the scale of change needed in emissions reductions and in social and technical systems has no precedent in human history. The committee made a number of detailed recommendations, including calling for⁵⁴:

- Clarity on the modelling, evidential base and assumptions that underpin how the plan was developed, and the associated policy decisions chosen.
- Demonstration of how the policies and proposals deliver the predicted emissions reductions for each sector.
- Clarity on timescales associated with policy and proposal commitments to ensure that these reflect the urgent nature of the climate emergency and the immediate opportunities to progress a green recovery.
- Clarity on the rationale behind protecting agricultural and industrial emissions reduction pathways from carbon leakage^{xi}.
- Reviewing the credibility of reliance on new and untested technologies, and to set out a plan B for how equivalent abatement could be achieved.
- Ongoing development of a Monitoring Framework and an associated policy tracker to outline progress against each policy and proposal, set out findings and next steps.
- Clear recognition that land is a finite resource, and a more integrated approach to cutting emissions across agriculture and land use, land-use change and forestry recognising that both depend on the management of a single resource and are expected to become more closely aligned in policy and practice.

Whilst debating the update to the CCP, Ben Macpherson Minister for Rural Affairs and the

x Electricity; Buildings; Transport; Industry; Waste and the Circular Economy; Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry; Agriculture; Negative Emissions Technologies

xi Carbon leakage may occur if, due to costs related to climate policies, businesses were to transfer production to other countries with more relaxed emission constraints. This could lead to an increase in total global emissions.

Natural Environment, declined to incorporate the Parliament's recommendations into the updated Plan, and cited an "urgent need to finalise the plan update [before the recess] so that we can focus on the implementation of its policies and deliver our targets". He stated 55 .

“ We will then look for opportunities to integrate additional policies into our overall package in due course. That will include any new policies in response to our full consideration of the committee recommendations, [...]. Ministers will make a statement in June, following the publication of the next set of greenhouse gas emissions statistics, and we will look for other opportunities to keep Parliament informed of our approach.”

Climate and Biodiversity COPs - making the link

In addition to the [UNFCCC](#), the [Convention on Biological Diversity](#) (CBD) was a major outcome of the 1992 [United Nations Conference on Environment and Development](#) held in Rio de Janeiro. These Rio Conventions underpin international efforts to tackle what is frequently referred to as the "twin crises" of climate change and biodiversity loss or, combined, the "environmental crisis". They are key to the UN's [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). In 2021, there will be a meeting of the COPs, the decision-making body, for each Convention. For the UNFCCC this will be the 26th meeting ([COP26](#)), for the CBD it will be the 15th meeting ([COP15](#)) during which the [post-2020 biodiversity framework](#) is expected to be adopted. See key facts and figures comparing the COPs in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) COPs; at a glance.

	UNFCCC: COP26	CBD: COP15
First meeting	Berlin, Germany, 28 March - 7 April 1995	Nassau, Bahamas, 28 November - 9 December 1994
Meeting frequency	Annually, unless the Parties decide otherwise	Annually until 1996, now every two years
Number of Parties	196	196
Primary source of scientific evidence	The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)
Major outputs	Kyoto Protocol (1997), Paris Agreement (2015)	2010 Biodiversity Target , Aichi Biodiversity Targets (2011)
Next meeting (to be confirmed)	Glasgow, Scotland, 1 - 12 November 2021	Kunming, China, 11 - 24 October 2021

Accelerating rates of biodiversity loss and climate change since the Industrial Revolution now exceed limits considered safe for humanity⁵⁶. The causes, consequences and responses to these twin crises are closely linked, with both terrestrial and marine habitat loss contributing to climate change, and these habitats in turn being impacted by the changing climate.

For example, [deforestation contributes to climate change](#) by increasing carbon emissions, and biodiversity loss through the destruction of forest habitats. Both habitat loss and climate change can cause local extinctions of some butterflies in Britain⁵⁷. Scottish saltmarsh restoration has been shown to increase [blue carbon](#) sequestration, climate change resilience and biodiversity. Renewable energy solutions to climate change such as wind turbines can have both positive and negative impacts on local wildlife^{58 59}.

Despite the scale and interacting nature of both crises, biodiversity loss receives less media coverage than climate change⁶⁰. Scientists agree that greater awareness of the biodiversity crisis, and its links with climate change, is needed both to mobilise action and to ensure that policies are integrated to maximise benefits and ensure that neither biodiversity nor the climate are adversely affected^{61 62 63}. Atmospheric chemist Sir Robert Watson, who has previously chaired both the IPCC and IPBES, [wrote](#) in 2019:

“ We cannot solve the threats of human-induced climate change and loss of biodiversity in isolation. We either solve both or we solve neither.”

The links between biodiversity and climate are recognised to some extent in targets and policies such as the [Paris Agreement](#) and Target 15 of the Aichi Targets, in which Parties are encouraged to conserve GHG sinks and reservoirs like trees and peatland. In a Scottish example, the [Climate Change Adaptation Programme 2019-2024](#) highlights the importance of biodiversity for climate change resilience, most explicitly in Outcome 5: "Our natural environment is valued, enjoyed, protected and enhanced and has increased resilience to climate change". However, biodiversity and climate targets are not sufficiently integrated to address the environmental crisis⁶³. Sir Robert Watson states:

“ As policymakers around the world grapple with the twin threats of climate change and biodiversity loss, it is essential that they understand the linkages between the two so that their decisions and actions address both. The world needs to recognise that loss of biodiversity and human-induced climate change are not only environmental issues, but development, economic, social, security, equity and moral issues as well. The future of humanity depends on action now. If we do not act, our children and all future generations will never forgive us.”

The outcomes of both COPs will guide national and subnational agendas and targets for addressing the environmental crisis. For example, [The Scottish Government's Statement of Intent on Biodiversity](#) announced the intention to publish a new Scottish Biodiversity Strategy within the 12 months following COP15 which takes into account the new global biodiversity framework, goals and targets.

Next year, the [United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification will also hold a COP](#), with a venue yet to be decided.

Scottish Parliament at COP26

Parliaments have a critical and ever-increasing role to play in these global emergencies – effective law making, scrutiny and budget approval is imperative in ensuring that targets and commitments made by governments are delivered.

COP26 allows for the sharing and showcasing of best practice to help parliaments around the world ensure that governments are being ambitious enough and holding them to their promises.

Alongside the formal talks, there are significant opportunities to explore and highlight the unique role of parliaments, and related opportunities for legislators to work together to drive international and domestic action.

The Scottish Parliament will host an [International Legislators' Summit](#) to discuss the climate emergency on 5 and 6 November 2021. Parliamentarians from around the world will convene to discuss “accelerating climate action and delivering a green, fair and resilient recovery”. Further events are also planned at the summit itself.

In Session 5, the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee (ECCLR) agreed a [series of key objectives for engagement with COP26](#), including to ⁶⁴ :

- Improve scrutiny of climate change by learning from international best practice.
- Develop lasting partnerships with national and international organisations and legislatures to support climate change work over the coming decade.
- Support operational work to scrutinise climate change work.
- Co-ordinate, plan and deliver further opportunities offered through COP26 engagement as the UK retains the COP26 presidency into 2022.

At the penultimate meeting of ECCLR in Session 5 the Scottish Government’s [developing plans and key priorities for COP26](#) were scrutinised ⁶⁵ .

[ECCLR’s Legacy Report](#) to its successor committee recommended that the Scottish Parliament set up a Net Zero Committee to lead and drive climate change scrutiny and action in the new session ⁶⁶ . Establishing a Net Zero Committee in advance of COP26 could have a global impact, encouraging other legislatures to look at how climate scrutiny is organised, supported and delivered. The concept of a Scottish Parliament Net Zero Committee was [endorsed by the CCC](#) and could have a clear mandate as a connecting, strategic committee, considering the alignment of key government strategies across portfolios with net zero goals.

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