

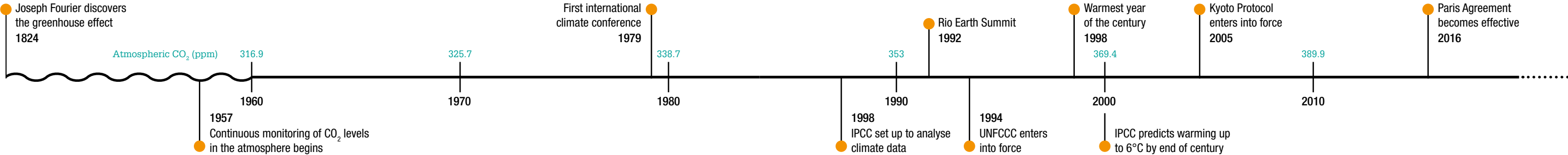
THE BES SCOTTISH POLICY GROUP'S GUIDE TO COP26

The 2021 UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) is scheduled to be held in Glasgow, Scotland from 1–12 November, bringing together world leaders to agree on climate action. It was postponed by a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased global environmental awareness and inspired calls for a ‘green recovery’ from the crisis.

This guide aims to provide BES members with the background to the conference, why it is so important and how to get involved.

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PART 1: INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE LEGISLATION

The UNFCCC

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is an international multilateral agreement setting the framework for global efforts to address climate change. The ultimate aim is to stabilise greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations at a level that ‘would prevent dangerous human interference’ with the global climate system. This was intended to be achieved in a timeframe that would avert threats to food production and allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change.

It recognises that the ‘largest share of historical and current global emissions of greenhouse gases has originated in developed countries’ so these Parties should take the lead in tackling climate change and the associated adverse effects. Signatories pledged to reduce emissions to 1990 levels, submit inventories of their emissions and financially support developing countries’ climate action through grants and loans.

The UNFCCC was negotiated at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and now has 197 Signatories, including all UN member states. The ‘Parties’ meet once a year at the Conference of the Parties (COP) to discuss progress and further commitments. The UNFCCC is the parent treaty of the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement.

The UNFCCC Secretariat

The UNFCCC established the Secretariat to oversee the implementation of the Convention. The Secretariat (also known as UN Climate Change) is located in Bonn, Germany and currently headed by Executive Secretary Patricia Espinosa. They are responsible for organising the COP, along with the host country.

The Kyoto Protocol

The 1997 Kyoto Protocol was the first agreement created to implement the UNFCCC. The Protocol established legally binding obligations for 37 developed countries and ‘economies in transition’ to reduce GHG emissions over the first commitment period (2008–2012) by an average of 5% compared with 1990 levels. The Protocol established flexible market mechanisms, allowing countries to trade in emissions and earn emission-reduction credits through projects carried out in developing countries, with an aim of aiding capacity building and technology transfer.

Parties succeeded in reducing their CO₂ emissions for the first commitment period. However, some have attributed this to the global recession and a drop in emissions by former Soviet states before the deal was signed. The Protocol was criticised, especially by the United States, for not setting reduction targets for high GHG-emitting developing countries.

The ‘Doha Amendment’ governs the second commitment period (2012–2020). This identifies commitments to reduce GHG emissions by at least 18% compared with 1990 levels by 2020. A total of 30 Parties, including the UK, notified the Secretariat that they would fulfil their commitments for this second commitment period.



The Paris Agreement

The 2016 Paris Agreement is an international climate treaty which was negotiated at COP21. Parties agreed to keep global average temperature rise to as close as possible to 1.5°C and ‘well below’ 2°C above pre-industrial levels.

Each Party is responsible for deciding its own emission reduction targets, known as ‘Nationally Determined Contributions’, which are not legally binding but must be reported on and made more ambitious every five years. 197 states have ratified the Paris Agreement, which, unlike the Kyoto Protocol, requires both developed and developing countries to submit targets. Many, including the UK, have targets to reach net zero emissions by 2050.

Countries also pledged to increase efforts to adapt to the impacts of climate change and foster resilience to future climate scenarios. The Agreement acknowledges the need to promote and ensure environmental integrity, calling on Parties to conserve and enhance GHG sinks and reservoirs, including biomass, forests and oceans.

PART 2: HOW DO CLIMATE SCIENCE AND POLICY INTERACT?

Successful interaction between climate science and policy is essential for decisions to be made based on the best available evidence. Long-term, systematic observation of global climate is the foundation of our understanding of climate change and its impacts, and the UNFCCC calls on Parties to undertake monitoring and cooperate on research.

Climate policy is informed by a number of international and regional organisations, including the World Meteorological Organisation, Integrated Assessment Modelling Consortium, Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission and World Climate Research Programme. Climate policy is interdisciplinary in nature, and is also informed by ecology,

sociology and economics research. For example, the International Union for Conservation of Nature has informed Parties of the practical nature-based solutions to climate change generated by restoration and sustainable management of biodiversity.

The IPCC

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the UN body for integrating and assessing scientific information on climate change, for which it was awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. Its comprehensive global assessment reports include future projections of global temperatures and their potential consequences.

PART 3: CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES

What is COP and what happens?

The Conference of the Parties (COP) acts as the supreme decision-making body of the UNFCCC. All States that are Parties to the Convention are represented and decisions are reached by consensus. They review implementation of the Convention and any other legal instruments that COP has adopted.

CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

This differs from the simple majority voting process. It means that no decision is made against the will of a Party. A solution must be found that each Party either actively supports or can accommodate. Consensus decision making is used because it shares power and helps to ensure the needs and opinions of each Party are considered equally in the process.

There is a need to encourage ambitious targets. However, if significant concerns remain, any Party can block a decision from moving forward. This often results in the lowest common denominator determining the outcome of decisions.

Why is COP26 in Glasgow?

COP happens once a year, unless the Parties decide otherwise. The location and presidency rotates among regional groupings of countries who take it in turns to select a host. The UK and Italy won a joint bid to host the COP26 in Glasgow, with pre-COP talks in Milan. UK Government MP Alok Sharma has been appointed as President. The position of ‘COP Presidency’ is to be a neutral overseer of the agenda and tone for COP. However, the role as host also puts pressure on the UK to show climate leadership.

What is pre-COP?

It is a preparatory meeting that takes place one month before COP and allows for an informal setting for Parties and key stakeholders to discuss and exchange views on some political aspects of the negotiations.

What are some of the key issues on the COP26 agenda?

Climate ambition: Parties are to submit new Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) every five years. As it has been five years since the Paris Agreement entered into force, Parties will outline how much they intend to further reduce emissions. Each NDC submission should be more ambitious than the last; this is referred to as the ‘ratchet mechanism’.

The rules for carbon markets: This is a contentious agenda item that had to be brought forward from previous COPs. The rules will govern how emissions are traded between states and companies.

Nature-based Solutions (NbS): COP26 will begin discussions on how to integrate NbS into strategies for climate mitigation. It will focus on how ecosystems and agricultural practices provide climate solutions for absorbing CO₂ from the atmosphere.

Loss and damage mechanism: This would provide compensation when a Party cannot adapt to the impacts of climate change, resulting in the loss of land, livelihoods and associated cultures. Countries around the world are already experiencing these kinds of losses.

Who attends COP?

COP26 will be the biggest international conference the UK has ever hosted, with over 30,000 delegates expected to attend including heads of state, scientists and campaigners.

The Blue Zone: Only delegates from UN-accredited Parties, observer organisations and UN staff can access this secure area at the Scottish Events Campus, where the international negotiations and agreements take place. There is also a pavilion where countries and observer organisations will hold exhibitions, receptions and presentations.

THE BLUE ZONE AND EXTRATERRITORIALITY

In the Blue Zone extraterritoriality applies; this is the state of being exempt from the jurisdiction of local law. The area will be controlled by United Nations Security and international law applies.

A Memorandum of Understanding on Security Cooperation will be agreed upon, detailing specific responsibilities of the United Nations Security and the host state’s police force.

The Green Zone: Located at the Glasgow Science Centre, the Green Zone is a platform for other groups and members of the public to be heard. Organisations are required to apply for space, and those accepted will have their own ‘pavilion’, exhibition or event to show what they are doing about climate change or convey their climate message to the public. Managed by the UK Government, there is an official Green Zone programme which attracts lots of attention from those who can’t access the Blue Zone, particularly from the media.

PART 4: HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?

Before COP: Now is the perfect time to get in touch with your local politician voicing your climate concerns and support for your country becoming a climate leader. Writing a joint signed letter from colleagues at your institution or organisation will be even more effective in this pre-COP period. In the UK for example, your local politician is required to respond to constituents’ letters.

As COP is such a large event, the host government usually relies on a team of volunteers to help run it. Applications for COP26 may still be open on the official website. If not, keep an eye out for where COP27 will be hosted and how you might be able to get involved.

During COP: There will be an unofficial programme of events taking place across Glasgow, organised by a wide range of organisations and individuals. We can also expect to see protests outside the Green Zone, with estimates suggesting these talks may attract up to 300,000 protestors. Wherever you are in the world, you can inspire others by sharing your positive climate actions using #TogetherForOurPlanet, which is the official # for COP26. You can also visit the public-facing exhibitions that happen in the Green Zone.

After COP: In May 2022, the BES will host a symposium on [Climate Science for Ecological Forecasting](#), working with the Royal Meteorological Society to bring together climate scientists and ecologists to discuss the future of our planet. 🌱

