

Governing the just transition: The reach and limits of anchor-led place-based governance

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Abstract

This article examines what forms of governance can enable a just and scalable green transition at the local level. While place-based approaches centred on anchor institutions are often promoted as vehicles for equitable and community-led transitions, their effectiveness is shaped by broader multiscale governance relations. The article develops a conceptual framework that integrates distributive, procedural, and restorative dimensions of climate justice within a multiscale governance perspective, highlighting how transition governance unfolds across scale and time. Drawing on 26 interviews with officials from London local authorities, the article shows that while local authorities have emerged as key anchor institutions in transition governance – leading by example, influencing public and private sector behaviour, and fostering community buy-in – their ability to advance just transitions beyond their immediate locality is limited by higher-level governance processes. Austerity-driven reductions in public sector capacity, competitive funding structures, and the lack of clear national policy guidance have created a fragmented and uneven landscape of climate action, reinforcing spatial disparities across localities. It concludes that anchor-led place-based governance requires procedural, redistributive and restorative mechanisms embedded across scales of governance. The findings advance debates on transition governance, the “local trap,” and climate justice by clarifying how place-based transitions depend on multiscale, redistributive governance architectures.

Keywords

just transition, multiscale governance, anchor institutions, local authorities, London

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摘要

本文考察何种治理形态能够在地方层面实现公正且具备可推广性的绿色转型。尽管以锚定机构为核心的场所本位路经常被推崇为实现公平、社区主导型转型的载体，但其有效性受制于更广泛的多尺度治理关系。本文提出一个概念框架，在多尺度治理分析视角下，整合气候正义的分配、程序与修复性维度，重点阐述转型治理如何跨尺度、跨时间展开。基于对伦敦地方当局官员的 26 场访谈，本文表明，尽管地方当局已成为转型治理中的关键锚定机构，能够以身作则、影响公私部门行为，并争取社区支持，但其在自身辖区之外推动公正转型的能力，受到更高层级治理机制的制约。财政紧缩造成公共部门能力削弱，加之竞争性资助机制以及国家层面缺乏明晰的政策指引，导致气候行动呈现出碎片化且发展不均衡的局面，进一步加剧各地区之间的空间差异。本文得出结论：锚定机构主导的场所本位治理，需要将程序、再分配与修复性机制嵌入各个治理尺度。这些研究结果通过阐明场所本位转型对多尺度、再分配型治理架构的依赖性，深化了关于转型治理、“地方陷阱”以及气候正义的讨论。

关键词

公正转型、多尺度治理、锚定机构、地方当局、伦敦

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Introduction

The net-zero transition involves a profound structural transformation, affecting production systems, consumption patterns, and what is value (*d*) in economic and societal terms. Ensuring that this transformation is just, socially, spatially, and intergenerationally, is essential to maintaining legitimacy and public support for climate action, especially in face of rising green discontent (Rodríguez-Pose and Bartalucci, 2024). Yet, growing evidence shows that the green transition unfolds unevenly across space and social groups. Economic and social benefits such as green job creation, control over new technologies, and savings from renewable energy are increasingly concentrated in core sectors and regions, while costs are disproportionately borne by those with the least capacity to adapt, creating spaces of protection and segregation that reinforce existing social inequalities (Garvey et al., 2023; Gudde et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2022; Tingey and Webb, 2020).

This unevenness underscores the need for effective governance models capable of supporting a just transition at local level. One proposed approach is Community Wealth Building (CWB), which seeks to promote equitable and accountable regional development by leveraging *anchor institutions*, that is, stable entities such as universities, hospitals, and local governments that are deeply embedded within their communities (Dennis and Stanley, 2023; Jackson and McInroy, 2017; Lacey-Barnacle et al., 2023; McAreavey, 2022). With their significant assets and long-term local commitments, these institutions have the potential to play a central role in ensuring that the green transition both benefits and is embraced by local communities.

At the same time, urban and regional studies have cautioned against the so-called ‘local trap’ (Purcell, 2006; Wahlund and Palm, 2022; While and Eadson, 2019), that is, working on the assumption that local-scale action is inherently more just or effective than interventions at other scales. Indeed, research on

anchor institutions suggests that their intrinsic motivations do not always align with local development needs or publicly defined missions (Ehlenz, 2018), and that their uneven geographical distribution may, paradoxically, reinforce regional inequalities (Bates et al. 2023; Reynolds 2020).

More generally, scholarship on multiscalar climate governance has highlighted the limits of inclusive local-level action, showing that urban adaptation operates within a constrained scalar “opportunity space” where local actors can innovate pragmatically but remain deeply limited by national and international climate governance dynamics (Heinen et al., 2022; Kythreotis et al., 2023) and their narrow imaginaries (Kythreotis and Bristow, 2017). Against this context, place-based action such as urban climate experimentation, open political possibilities (Manganelli, 2025) often encounter limits to scaling as they become entangled with governance logics prioritising large capital interests (Nciri and Levenda, 2020; Sareen and Waagsaether, 2023) and are institutionalised technocratically in ways that narrow participation (Creasy et al., 2021).

Building on these insights, this article theoretically and empirically examines the capacity of anchor institutions to contribute to a just green transition, focusing on the example of local authorities (LAs). It develops a theoretical framework that conceptualises the potential of anchor institutions to advance the just transition across its distributive, procedural, and restorative dimensions, while recognising the multiscalar interactions among these dimensions within a capitalist system of accumulation prone to uneven social and spatial development. By connecting the scales of transition governance to the distributive, procedural, and restorative dimensions of justice, the framework uncovers a critical limitation of anchor-led place-based governance rooted in the uneven geographies of distribution systematically

produced through capitalist accumulation. Within this context, the capacity of actors – whether individuals, firms, or anchor institutions – to participate in the green transition and its governance is distributionally conditioned. Effective anchor-led place-based governance therefore depends upon broader redistributive and restorative mechanisms operating across scales.

We illustrate this point empirically through the anchoring role assumed by London’s LAs.¹ Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 26 key informants from LAs, we find *first* that London’s LAs have indeed emerged as key anchor institutions promoting the green transition, leading by example, influencing public and private behaviour, and fostering community buy-in. As such, they exercise a critical coordinating agency necessary for advancing the just transition along its participatory and distributional dimensions at local level. *Second*, however, the ability of LAs to participate in transition governance as anchor institutions is itself highly uneven and contingent on resource endowments. We show how neoliberal rescaling of the state and austerity-driven restructuring of governance systems have produced significant distributional barriers to anchoring agency. Competitive funding systems, post-austerity debt burdens, and chronic underfunding systematically favour better-resourced authorities while constraining the ability of financially pressured boroughs to participate as anchor institutions in transition governance. Consequently, while LAs can influence procedural and distributive justice *within* their jurisdictions, higher-level governance structures systematically undermine distributional and participatory justice *across* boroughs.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: Section “The possibilities and limitations of anchor institutions in promoting a just transition” reviews the possibilities and limitations of anchor institutions as

governance models for a just transition. Section “London LAs as anchor institutions in net-zero transition governance” investigates the extent to which London’s LAs act as anchor institutions in practice. Section “The limits to anchor-led place-based governance” examines the limits to their ability to promote core aspects of a just transition.

The possibilities and limitations of anchor institutions in promoting a just transition

Place-based action in anchor-led governance models

The green transition is accelerating the reproduction of social and spatial inequalities across multiple sectors and scales. In the productive sphere, it is reshaping spatial divisions of labour through the rise of low-carbon industries and the decline of energy-intensive sectors (While and Eadson, 2022). Emerging spatial divisions of labour are evident both globally and regionally (Rice et al., 2022). At the regional level, high-value, green innovation-driven clusters emerge near corporate headquarters, while low-value activities concentrate in disadvantaged areas relying on marginalised labour (While and Eadson, 2022). Beyond production, the green transition deepens other social and spatial inequalities. Unequal access to sustainable food, active travel infrastructure, quality housing, and green spaces, for instance, reinforces inequalities across these core dimensions of human well-being (Jennings et al., 2020). Mitigation interventions occur unevenly, creating spaces of ecological segregation, securing protection for privileged populations while neglecting others (Rice et al., 2022). Inequalities also appear in how burdens are distributed, with local governments differing greatly in their commitment to and implementation of climate action plans, leading to uneven burden-

sharing across regions (Garvey et al., 2023; Gudde et al., 2021; Tingey and Webb, 2020).

Taken together, these dynamics raise the question of appropriate governance models capable of creating the conditions for a just transition – one that equitably distributes the costs and benefits of decarbonisation while countering the reproduction of social and spatial inequalities. Urban and regional studies underscore the critical role of place-based action in the green transition (Bridge and Gailing, 2020; Coenen et al., 2021; Hansen and Coenen, 2015; Nicolosi and Feola, 2016; Sareen and Waagsaether, 2023), reflecting both the localised nature of emissions and the capacity of local initiatives to leverage context-specific knowledge and resources (Hansen and Coenen, 2015; While and Eadson, 2019).

Recent research highlights the use of *anchor institutions* to foster community wealth and promote a just transition as a promising model of place-based governance (Lacey-Barnacle et al., 2023; McAreavey, 2022). Anchor institutions can structure the productive activities and wider social and economic interactions within the local community. They are themselves *anchored* in the sense that they are rooted in place either because they are firmly established in their local economies and are unlikely to relocate or because their very organisational purpose is tied to the locality making it impossible for them to move. They are also *anchoring* actors in the sense that their presence structures local productive activities and social interactions. Anchor institutions are typically large, non-profit, public-sector organisations such as universities, hospitals, schools, housing associations and local governments but can extend to local enterprises such as airports, football clubs, and long-standing employers in social enterprises (Ehlenz, 2018; Vize, 2018). Because their long-term viability is intertwined with the well-being of their surrounding communities

and because they possess significant assets that can be leveraged for local benefit, anchor institutions are viewed as vehicles for equitable, resilient, and accountable regional development (Hutchison and Cairns, 2010).

To date, most empirical evidence on how anchor institutions support community development comes from studies of universities and hospitals, the so-called “eds and meds” (Ansell et al., 2023; Ehlenz, 2018; Franz et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2023; Vize, 2018). Examples such as Rush University in Chicago and the city of Preston in the UK demonstrate how anchor institutions can strengthen local wealth retention, foster community development, and help address structural inequalities (Ansell et al. 2023; Jackson and McInroy, 2017; Manley and Whyman, 2021).

Disentangling the ‘local-trap’

However, regional scholarship has cautioned against the so-called “local trap” (Purcell, 2006; Wahlund and Palm, 2022; While and Eadson, 2019), the assumption that actors and action at local scale is inherently more likely to produce the desired social and ecological outcomes and therefore inherently preferable to action at other scales. Treating regions as closed systems overlooks that transition governance is shaped by actors and dynamics operating across multiple spatial scales (Bauer and Fuenfschilling, 2019; Coenen et al., 2021; Hansen and Coenen, 2015; Traill and Cumbers, 2025).

Indeed, recent scholarship on urban climate experimentation has highlighted the limits of local action within multiscale governance systems. Climate experiments remain embedded within neoliberal, technocratic, and growth-oriented governance structures that frequently privilege incumbent capitalist interests and constrain more transformative forms of transition governance (Nciri and Levenda, 2020; Sareen and

Waagsaether, 2023). While urban initiatives can open innovative political spaces – such as Barcelona’s digital democracy platforms (Sareen and Waagsaether, 2023) – efforts to scale transformative interventions, including electricity municipalisation, have encountered significant barriers from incumbent energy interests protected through Spanish and EU competition law. Similarly, Nciri and Levenda (2020) show how lessons from a technically successful Canadian solar district heating project were selectively framed in ways that protected existing energy regimes. Creasy et al. (2021) further demonstrate how urban experimentation can institutionalise selective participation by privileging expert actors and technocratic legitimacy over diverse social knowledges. Taken together, this literature suggests that place-based governance operates within a constrained scalar “opportunity space” where local actors can innovate pragmatically but remain limited by national and international governance dynamics (Heinen et al., 2022; Kythreotis et al., 2023), while the green transition itself remains narrowly framed through neoliberal logics of competitiveness, market-led growth, and technocratic governance.

This suggests that transition governance requires a *multiscale and multidimensional framework* that captures the complex ways in which the costs and benefits of transition are distributed across places, firms, and citizens (Hansen and Coenen, 2015; Hodson and Marvin, 2012; While and Eadson, 2019). Two aspects of this multiscale context are particularly important. *First*, the governance system itself has undergone significant restructuring over the past four decades under neoliberalism. The territorial division of labour between central and local states has been rescaled (Brenner, 2009), as central government has offloaded responsibilities to subnational levels while simultaneously restricting spending and redirecting

intervention efforts towards the private sector (Lobao et al., 2018; Traill and Cumbers, 2025). Austerity-induced cuts in central government grants resulted in a 37% real-term reduction in local government funding, which disproportionately affected poorer areas with higher levels of multiple deprivation (Dagdeviren, 2024; Dagdeviren and Karwowski, 2022). State-rescaling and ‘unfunded mandates’ (Rodríguez-Pose and Vidal-Bover, 2024) have generated a highly uneven geography of financial and planning capacity across local governments (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016; Traill and Cumbers, 2025). Place-based governance therefore needs to recognise the limitations to regional capacity especially in disadvantaged regions (Hansen and Coenen, 2015). Regions lacking sufficient resources will struggle to implement CWB strategies based on anchor institutions, while wealthier and better resourced areas continue to advance (Reynolds 2020; Bates et al. 2023).

Second, evolving multiscalar governance systems are embedded within a capitalist system of accumulation that is inherently prone to uneven economic, social, and spatial development. Without addressing capitalism’s structural tendency to generate “wasted abundance, labour, and resources” (Donald and Gray, 2019), place-based governance centred on anchor institutions risks reinforcing market-oriented power structures and deepening regional inequalities. One mechanism through which capitalist accumulation generates spatial unevenness are productive hierarchies within firms, which produce a spatial differentiation in value addition and a corresponding social division in income, wealth, and status (Wolf, 2026; While and Eadson, 2022). This uneven geography of distribution shapes the capacity for participation in the green transition. For example, in the productive transition, peripheral producers in Sweden’s chemical industry had limited influence over

sustainable technology investments despite strong local expertise (Bauer and Fuenfschilling, 2019). Similar distributional barriers to participation emerge in the mobility and domestic energy transition. The French Yellow Vest movement revealed how regional disparities in income and access to public services constrained participation in, and ultimately public support for, the mobility transition (Bourdin and Torre, 2023). The domestic energy transition, demands costly upgrades to heating systems that wealthier households can more easily afford, boosting their property values and widening wealth gaps. While LAs can attempt to widen participation through locally embedded initiatives, their ability to address these distributional barriers remains constrained by higher-level governance arrangements. For example, a North London council created a local retrofit cooperative to support community development and improve access to energy efficiency upgrades. However, national incentives targeted only “able-to-pay” households, excluding rented and conservation-area properties, while accreditation requirements limited the cooperative’s ability to reach the most vulnerable (Ince and Marvin, 2019). Such unequal capacities to participate also determine whose interests shape transition processes (Bauer and Fuenfschilling, 2019; Bridge and Gailing, 2020; Colenbrander et al., 2018; Creasy et al., 2021; Hodson and Marvin, 2012; Rice et al., 2022).

The potential of anchor institutions to advance a just transition thus unfolds within an uneven geography of distribution that skews participation and reproduces the advantages of dominant groups, while mechanisms designed to counteract spatial and interpersonal inequality have been progressively dismantled under neoliberalism. These dynamics underscore a critical point: if anchor-led place-based governance is to contribute meaningfully to a just transition,

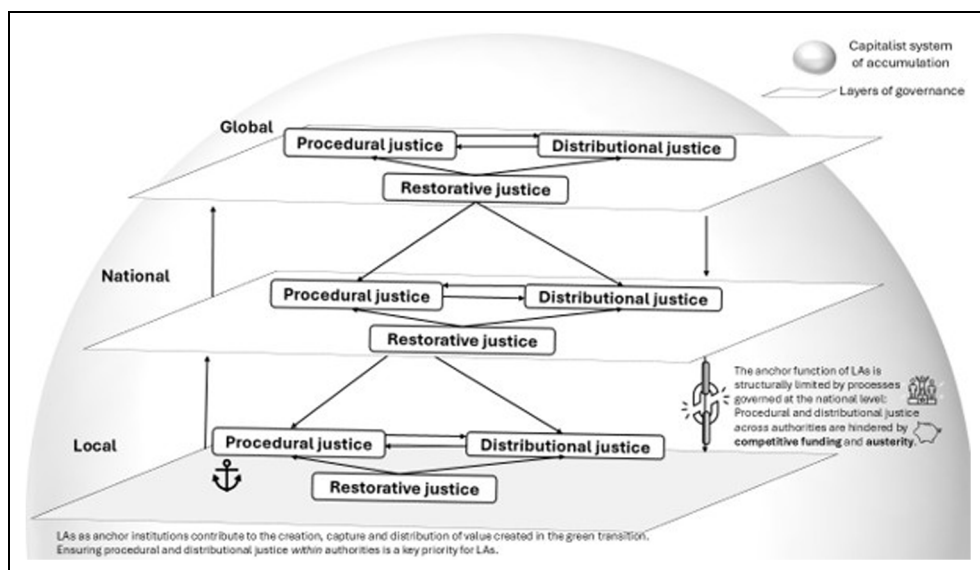


Figure 1. Multiscalar and multidimensional determination of transition governance.

Source: The authors.

it must engage with foundational questions about how value is created, captured, and circulated – and the normative principles that should guide its distribution *between*, not merely *within*, localities (Dennis and Stanley, 2023).

Conceptualising the possibilities and limitations based on anchor-institution-led place-based governance

Building on this, we develop a multiscalar, multidimensional analytical framework to conceptualise the reach and limits of LAs as anchor institutions (Figure 1). While applied here to anchor-led place-based governance, the framework, more broadly, provides analytical lenses for understanding how distributive, procedural, and restorative dimensions of justice co-condition one another across scales of governance, offering a basis for analysing other public, private, and community-led green transition processes.

Drawing on McCauley and Heffron's (2018) tripartite model (see also Bulkeley et al., 2014; Colenbrander et al., 2018), we identify three interrelated dimensions of a just transition. *Distributive justice* refers to the fair allocation of costs and benefits across individuals and spaces with differing needs and vulnerabilities. *Procedural justice* concerns the inclusivity and fairness of decision-making processes, particularly around how value is created, captured, and distributed in the green transition. *Restorative justice* introduces a time dimension, recognising the importance of addressing historical procedural and distributive injustices rooted in past political and economic decisions.

These dimensions of justice are interdependent. Distributionally fair outcomes may not result from fair processes (if they are for instance the result of authoritarian action) and fair processes based on moral rights and entitlements may not necessarily result in distributionally fair outcomes given the

spatial and temporal interactions across dimensions of justice. For example, past procedural/ distributional injustice such as damage inflicted by austerity, deindustrialisation or structural divestment may have marginalised some localities thereby limiting their participation in decisions over how value is created, captured, and distributed. Restorative justice is therefore crucial for enabling localities that have suffered from social and economic marginalisation to participate in a procedurally and distributionally fair green transition. Spatial governance relations operate bidirectionally: local processes shape, and are shaped by, governance at higher scales, with either amplifying or mitigating effects. For instance, uneven regional development, can lead to decision-making processes at higher scales favouring core regions. Conversely, governance processes imposed at higher scales may systematically disadvantage certain localities at lower scales.

Distributional, procedural, and restorative dimensions of climate governance therefore interact among one another, time, and scale. The framework's main addition to place-based governance is to foreground that participation in the green transition and its governance is conditioned by uneven distributions of resources, institutional capacity, and socio-economic advantage. Applied to anchor-led place-based governance, these complex and non-linear interconnections help to trace the reach and limits of LAs as anchor institutions in transition governance. LAs as anchor institutions can contribute to the creation, capture, and distribution of value created in the green transition with the potential to influence procedural and distributional justice *within* their immediate localities. However, as higher-level governance processes fail to correct uneven geographies of distribution and even systematically reinforce distributional barriers to participation, the ability of LAs to participate as anchor

institutions in transition governance is highly uneven, thereby undermining distributive justice *across* boroughs.

Neoliberal evolutions of the UK's multi-scalar governance system, including austerity and a competitive funding regime have systematically reinforced distributional barriers LAs face to participate in anchor-led place-based governance. Austerity has undermined both procedural and distributional justice by leaving the weakest and most disadvantaged councils least able to assume anchor roles, given their reduced financial and planning capacities to develop and implement net-zero strategies. The competitive allocation of central government funding for non-statutory duties such as net-zero further reinforces spatial unevenness across councils. Privatisation has added an additional layer of constraint: a largely privatised and deregulated system of public provision has left many LAs with little direct control over key infrastructures – such as energy, waste, and transport systems (Sugar et al., 2022). Consequently, without broader distributional, procedural, and restorative mechanisms operating at national scale, the anchoring role of LAs remains limited to promoting justice within rather than across localities.

London LAs as anchor institutions in net-zero transition governance

To examine how distributive, procedural, and restorative dimensions of justice interact across scales of governance in practice, we conducted 26 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from London borough councils and related public bodies between late 2023 and early 2024. Participants included 21 officers from 14 different boroughs overseeing climate, finance, housing, and economic development as well as five participants from related public bodies, including the GLA, UKIB, and a local government consultancy. Sampling captured

Table 1. Participant overview based on key borough characteristics.

Position relative to other London boroughs	GHG emissions p.c. (2021)	GHG p.c. emission % change 2005–2021	Council tax receipts £ p.p.	Income deprived residents per 1000 residents	Debt per resident % change 2008–2022	Inner/outer London
Above average	15	10	10	14	4	Inner: 15
Below average	6	11	11	7	17	Outer: 6

Calculations based on DESNZ (UK local authority and regional greenhouse gas emissions national statistics: 2005–2021), MHCLG (English Indices of Deprivation 2019), DLUHC (Borrowing and Investment Data).

variation in geography (inner vs outer London), fiscal health, and climate ambition (Table 1). Interviews were thematically coded using a hybrid deductive–inductive approach, where the deductive coding structure was informed by the framework’s distributive, procedural, and restorative justice dimensions, while inductive coding captured emergent themes relating to austerity, debt burdens, competitive funding, and institutional capacity. We triangulated our interviews with a systematic review of LA’s published climate action plans, which were coded for types of anchoring activity and levels of climate ambition, enabling us both to empirically ground participant perceptions and to assess how widespread reported practices and governance approaches were across boroughs. Interviews continued until thematic saturation was reached, with later interviews largely confirming existing patterns regarding anchoring roles, capacity constraints, and funding inequalities.

London’s governance structure combines 32 boroughs and the City of London with the regional-level Greater London Authority (GLA), led by a directly elected Mayor responsible for strategic coordination in areas including transport, air quality, and retrofit. Alongside this, London Councils, as a collective of local government in London, provides horizontal coordination across boroughs. Yet despite London’s comparatively

extensive metropolitan governance system and some independent revenue streams through TfL fares and ULEZ charges, both the GLA and boroughs remain heavily dependent on central government funding, limiting their scope for autonomous redistributive and restorative transition governance. Although London’s LAs operate in a relatively affluent and climate-active Global North context, substantial disparities persist in their capacity to support transition governance. Hence, London reveals both the potential and limits of LAs as anchors in the green transition.

London’s LAs as anchor institutions facilitating widespread participation in the green transition through innovative forms of governance

Our interview findings and review of climate actions plans show that LAs assume critical anchoring agency, which widens participation and advances the just transition along its participatory dimension. London boroughs show strong commitment to net-zero. All London councils have published climate action plans, even though climate action is not part of their statutory duties, with 84% setting their own net-zero targets (2025–2040) and 58% extending them borough-wide (2030–2050). In some cases, action is driven by committed leaders – one likened

their approach to NASA's mission culture (KI2), yet overall motivation is a response to community concern: "Residents are saying they're really worried about climate change" (KI1).

Our interviews revealed that LAs use a variety of tools to assume their anchor function. *At a first level*, this involves leading by example. Councils reduce emissions where they have direct control, such as retrofit of their social housing stock and the councils' own buildings, decarbonising the council's vehicle fleet and existing heat networks. In their climate action plans, 100% of London councils pledged to lead by example in this way. A total of 90% of London councils outlined retrofit plans. A total of 58% of London councils outlined plans to improve, expand, or set-up district heat networks. A total of 100% of London councils outline plans to expand EV infrastructure. Councils are also leveraging more innovative solutions. For instance, one council established a vertical farm powered by an energy recovery facility, showcasing their creativity in utilising available resources to meet net-zero goals (KI8).

At a second level, this involves influencing public and private actors in areas beyond the council's direct control, with 90% of London councils including such measures in their climate action plans. Our interviews suggest that councils primarily rely on the planning tools at their disposal, for example, to create an urban environment in which walking and cycling is safe and enjoyable, councils expand bike lanes, bike parking, and the provision of E-bikes. In the approval of new buildings, councils consider energy efficiency and cycle parking in the basement (KI1, KI11).

Councils actively incentivise the private corporate sector to invest in decarbonization through measures such as offering business rate rebates or grants to local businesses

(KI1, KI8), and collaborating with local education providers to address capacity constraints within the private sector. For instance, KI11 Council established a Construction Skills Centre to address the growing demand for transition-related skills, such as heat pump installers. As one council representative noted "when you look at the demand for heat pump installers or whatever the economy needs for the green transition, we need to be training those people. So, there's been a focus on creating employment training opportunities" (KI11). As KI2 explained: "I try to think about how many people we need in KI2 to do work and how it would transform the community if more of that net-zero funding stayed local, rather than bringing in workers from outside." To achieve this, KI2 collaborates with education providers to ensure that qualifications and courses match market needs (KI2).

In their direct support for local green businesses, KI8, for example, supported a circular-economy business producing mycelium-based insulation "you can deliver your food waste to them. They use that to grow the mushrooms, to grow the insulation into exactly the size of specification you need. It's brilliant" (KI8). Other councils fund a range of sustainability projects, including solar energy installations, energy efficiency initiatives, and capacity-building projects, such as setting up energy cooperatives within the borough (KI11). These efforts build on a recognition that building this private sector capacity is vital to unlocking co-benefits for the local economy (KI2, KI8, KI11) and can therefore be considered as efforts to retain value locally.

At a third level, the anchoring tools used by London LAs focus on building public consent for net zero by enabling bottom-up community initiatives and fostering innovative forms of participation and civic engagement. As one council

representative put it, councils play a key role in forming partnerships and facilitating collaboration:

Councils definitely have a role in bringing partnerships together, whether it's engaging with businesses in the community—asking how we can work together to build green jobs—or reaching out to civil society, asking how they're supporting fuel-poor residents, and figuring out how we can enable that. Sometimes, it's as simple as providing in-kind support, assisting with grant funding, or creating a space where they can collaborate, network, and achieve meaningful outcomes (K11).

One council, for instance, helped a local community group by underwriting their funding application, making it easier for the group to secure funding (K17). Another council established a citizen's jury to provide recommendations on how decarbonisation funds should be allocated (K111). Several councils have issued climate bonds, whose main objective was not primarily about raising funds but about community involvement: "It's more about engaging local residents, encouraging them to think differently about the transition, what the council is doing, and how they can be a part of it" (K19). Another added: "[Climate bonds are] really about community engagement and buy-in. We could easily access £1 million today from the PWLB for climate projects, but we've invested significant time and resources into setting this up" (K111).

To enhance community engagement, several councils have established *community energy funds* financed through carbon offset programmes. These funds allow residents and local organisations to bid for projects such as installing solar panels on community centres or heat pumps in churches (K12, K13, K111). As one officer explained, the aim is to "empower people to take action in their communities and fund projects that benefit the widest group" (K12). Councils

also involve local groups directly in project delivery, for example, by outsourcing biodiversity and green space maintenance to community organisations, which receive funding and capacity support with the aim to deepen engagement with local residents (K111).

London's LAs demonstrate a strong commitment to advancing a distributionally just transition

The anchoring role assumed by London's LA's also comes with the ambition to enable a distributionally just green transition. Councils consistently emphasised that equity considerations guide their climate programmes (K11, K12, K14, K15, K17, K111, K16, K120). Respondents described efforts to retain publicly created value within local communities, prioritising "projects that deliver benefit to the widest group of people" (K12). As one participant explained: "We [have a] social focus, the just transition. We are focussing on inequality within our decision making" (K111). Others highlighted engagement with civil society to ensure that fuel-poor households and marginalised groups participate in the green transition (K11). Projects were often approved "not solely for their carbon-saving potential but for their broader social advantages" (K15).

Typically, these distributional ambitions are framed around co-benefit imaginaries. In their climate action plans 84% of boroughs emphasised co-benefits, framing the transition not as a cost but as an opportunity for value creation that can and should be captured and distributed locally. Interviews confirmed that net-zero initiatives are explicitly designed to promote community well-being, stimulate local economies, and address social needs by retaining publicly created value within local community to enable a just transition *within* the borough (K11, K12, K111). As one officer explained, climate funding is

regarded as “growth money ... funnelled into local supply chains” (KI1). Efforts often focus on small- and medium-sized local businesses rather than large corporations: “That’s where the real benefits accrue to the community” (KI1). Regular engagement, such as business surveys on climate concerns, helps align local priorities with net-zero goals (KI10).

Officers repeatedly highlighted the distributionally beneficial nature of co-benefits from climate investment, linking it to skills development, health improvements, and social cohesion. For example, councils are investing in training programmes and green construction centres to create local employment, while also highlighting public health gains from energy-efficient housing and active travel, which will mean that “hundreds of families would not come to use health services” (KI2). As one respondent put it, walking projects and well-designed buildings “ultimately have health, social, and economic benefits” (KI11). Interviewees also described how the co-benefit framing helps build internal consent within councils in teams working on statutory duties who might see climate action otherwise as a secondary objective. To make climate adaptation palatable to colleagues in the housing teams, one interviewee highlighted how they strategically highlight co-benefits and integrate energy-efficiency measures into routine maintenance cycles (KI11).

The limits to anchor-led place-based governance

The ability of LAs to participate as anchor institutions in the green transition is shaped by the uneven geographies of distribution that arise, among other, from productive differentiation across boroughs. Variations in local economic structures generate disparities in revenue streams – particularly

through business rates and council tax – and shape demographic characteristics, resulting in uneven fiscal and institutional capacity alongside unequal levels of demand for statutory services. Our interviews reveal that these distributional barriers to anchoring agency have been intensified by neoliberal reforms to the UK’s multiscalar governance system through two key channels. First, uneven post-austerity debt burdens have amplified uneven geographies of financial and planning capacity. Second, the competitive funding regime for climate action, by design, favours well-resourced LAs with bid-writing and match-funding capacity, and therefore distributionally conditions the extent to which LAs can assume their anchoring function. Whilst London’s LAs are committed to advancing a just transition *within* their boroughs, these two channels systematically undermine distributive justice *across* boroughs and call for a strengthening of redistributive channels and a reform of the local government funding system for more widely (see Figure 2 for a summary).

Distributional barriers to anchoring agency: uneven post-austerity debt burdens

The first barrier to participation in anchored place-based governance stems from unfunded mandates introduced by neoliberal state rescaling and reinforced through austerity. In England and Northern Ireland, there is no comprehensive framework detailing how LAs should contribute to achieving net-zero targets. Councils are formally expected to incorporate climate adaptation into local plans, yet few mandates exist for concrete actions such as retrofitting homes or developing local energy plans. Instead, local councils are left to “figure things out on their own” (KI12) and develop their own strategies based on fragmented policies and unclear government communications.

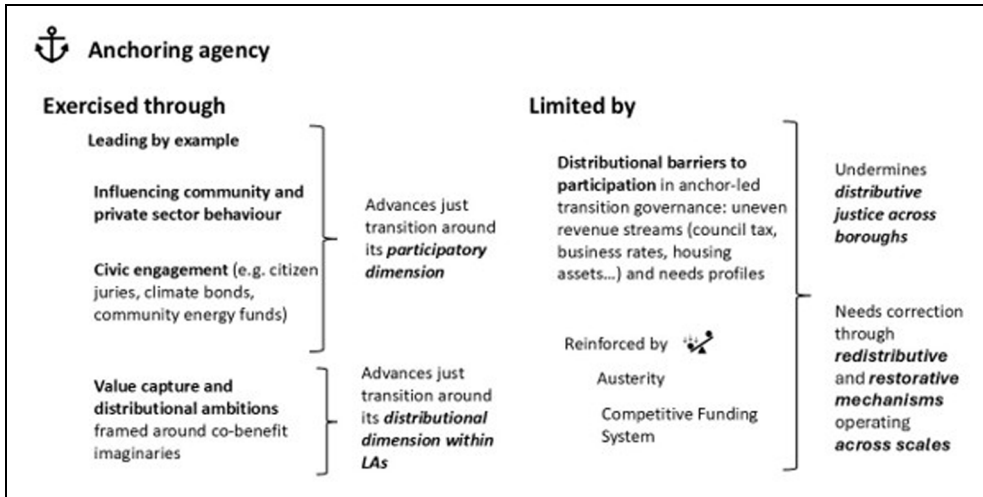


Figure 2. Possibilities and limitations of anchor-led place-based governance: Findings from the London case. Source: The authors.

Several interviewees noted that the absence of statutory duty amounts to an unfunded mandate, where councils are placed under legal obligation to act without having a corresponding increase in fiscal resources to do so (KI1, KI5, KI6). While all councils are affected, those with stronger accounting and planning capabilities are better positioned to navigate this additional unfunded mandate.

Climate action demands significant public sector capacity to identify needs, costs, benefits, and priorities. As one officer observed, decarbonisation requires “incredibly systematic change” that is “complicated, cross-cutting, and affects every area of the Council” (KI1). However, austerity measures and rising demand on statutory services have severely eroded councils’ ability to plan and deliver such transformative change. While even financially stable boroughs expressed concern about how to meet net-zero goals without passing costs onto residents (KI5), financially distressed authorities described how they must deprioritise climate action altogether as they are

“barely managing to set the budget for statutory services” (KI8).

Crucially, our interviews suggest that the capacity and capabilities of LAs needed to advance the green transition are undermined by the accumulation of post-austerity debt burdens, more so than on local deprivation levels. For example, KI7 council, which has issued Section 114 notices due to financial distress, employs just one temporary staff member in its climate action team. By contrast, KI11 council, which has one of the lowest debt levels per resident in London, employs a team of 12 people dedicated to climate work, despite scoring worse on deprivation indicators (see Table 2). Councils with high debt burdens are forced to divert resources away from climate initiatives to focus on balancing their budgets. This illustrates that post-austerity debt, rather than deprivation levels alone, limit LAs capacity to participate as anchor institutions in transition governance. Uneven anchoring capacity, in turn, undermines just transition objectives across boroughs.

Table 2. Local authority profile KI7 and KI11.

LA profile	GHG emissions p.c. (2021)	GHG p.c. emission % change 2005–2021	Council tax receipts, £ p.p.	Income deprived residents per 1000 residents	Debt per resident % change 2008–2022	Inner London
KI7	Below average	Below average	Above average	Below average	Above average	No
KI11	Above average	Below average	Below average	Above average	Below average	Yes

Calculations based on: DESNZ (UK local authority and regional greenhouse gas emissions national statistics: 2005–2021), MHCLG (English Indices of Deprivation 2019), DLUHC (Borrowing and Investment Data).

Distributional barriers to anchoring agency: competitive funding regime for net-zero projects

A second major barrier to participation in anchor-led place-based governance is the competitive funding regime, which requires bid-writing and match-funding capacity, thereby excluding less well-resourced authorities and producing uneven access to net-zero funding across London. Our interviews revealed that funding opportunities for climate action at the local level are not only scarce (KI1) but also fragmented (KI1, KI8) and ad-hoc (KI1, KI2), placing significant demands on already overstretched councils. These constraints particularly disadvantage councils facing high levels of demand for statutory services or those with limited capacity due to post-austerity debt. Bid writing alone consumes a substantial share of officers' time; one estimated that "around 70% of my time has gone into preparing this SHDF bid" (KI6).

To secure central government grants, councils must demonstrate extensive project readiness, including detailed data on housing stock, energy performance, and contractor availability (KI2). Several respondents noted that these data-intensive requirements disadvantage councils with limited capacity, creating spatial disparities in access to funding. The climate officer from the debt-distressed KI7 council noted that they are structurally excluded from collecting the necessary data

because the council is forced to sell its real estate assets to deal with the debt problem: "we don't know which buildings are high-carbon or high-cost, and we lack the funds to collect that data... The Council is on a selling spree, so it's hard to justify collecting data when we don't know the future of these estates" (KI7).

By contrast, wealthier boroughs with digital infrastructure and in-house expertise are well-placed to maintain accurate data and respond quickly to funding opportunities (KI11). Over time, well-resourced councils accumulate expertise through repeated funding successes, widening the gap between resource-rich and resource-poor localities (KI5). The competitive funding landscape systematically favours better-capacitated councils creating a 'winner takes all' dynamic, which effectively excludes financially distressed authorities from participation: "Right now, bidding for the next wave of social housing decarbonisation funds isn't worth it for us – we simply don't have the capacity" (KI8). Match-funding requirements further exacerbate inequality. Councils with larger housing portfolios or higher revenue streams can provide required contributions, while those under fiscal pressure must choose between statutory obligations, such as social care, and climate projects (KI3).

In addition to public sector limitations, councils also face private sector capacity shortages. Several officers reported being

unable to deliver funded projects due to insufficient contractor availability and local skills gaps. One interviewee admitted that their council “had to return nearly half” of allocated grant money because of these shortfalls (KI2). While some boroughs are partnering with local skills centres to address this challenge, the councils most affected by austerity are least able to invest in such partnerships.

Even better resourced LAs, despite benefiting from the system, criticised the competitive funding regime for undermining distributional justice across boroughs. As KI11 noted: “We should not be competing with other boroughs because ultimately CO₂ is everyone’s CO₂. The competitive funding process complicates this issue” (KI11). Similarly, KI1 stressed: “A gap is opening up between those getting the money and those who are not – and that’s not good enough because we need every borough to get there” (KI1).

While LAs are committed to advancing a just transition within their boroughs, the competitive funding regime distributionally conditions the extent to which they can assume anchoring functions and, as a result, undermines distributive justice across boroughs. Anchor-led place-based governance therefore requires reforming local government finance to enable collaboration rather than competition and indeed wider *restorative action* correcting the systematic underfunding of LAs: councils need “additional financial capacity and a transformation in service delivery models, particularly in health and social care ... to prevent sectors from falling into a downward spiral of crisis intervention” (KI3). The cumulative effects of austerity and short-term funding cycles have locked councils into reactive crisis management, undermining long-term, equitable climate investment: “The lack of adequate funding compels LAs to prioritise immediate crises over sustainable solutions” (KI3).

Conclusions

Place-based approaches, particularly those centred on anchor institutions, have been advanced as promising models for mobilising local assets, institutional capacity, community legitimacy and knowledge to build local wealth and support just transitions. Yet, urban and regional scholarship reminds us that local action does not unfold in closed systems. Instead, it operates within multiscalar systems of governance and accumulation that reproduce uneven capacities and outcomes. Against this backdrop, the article investigated the conditions under which anchor-led place-based governance can generate socially and spatially just transitions that extend beyond their immediate localities.

Theoretically, the article proposed a multiscalar and multidimensional conceptualisation of transition governance. By integrating distributive, procedural, and restorative justice within a scalar governance framework, it captures how transition governance simultaneously unfolds across scale and through time, within a capitalist system prone to uneven development. The article identified two key transformations in the multilevel governance system. First, the rescaling of the state under neoliberalism, which has weakened the financial and planning capacity of local governments in geographically uneven ways; and second, the retrenchment of restorative mechanisms that once mitigated spatial and interpersonal inequalities. In this context, distributional outcomes often precondition the scope for participation, and restorative action to counteract an uneven geography of distribution is essential to enable a more equitable geography of participation.

Tracing the ways in which different dimensions of justice co-condition each other helps to clarify both the reach and limits of anchor-led place-based governance. Anchor

institutions like LAs can influence how value is created, captured, and distributed within their localities, thereby advancing distributive and participatory justice. However, in the absence of restorative mechanisms to address historical inequalities in fiscal capacity, infrastructure, and institutional power, their anchoring potential remains bounded within uneven geographies of distribution. The framework thus conceptualises transition governance not as a matter of scale choice, but as an interdependent system of justice relations operating between and across scales as much as through time.

Empirically, the article drew on semi-structured interviews with 26 officials from London LAs to investigate how anchor-led place-based governance unfolds in practice. Our findings demonstrate that LAs have emerged as key anchor institutions in transition governance, leading by example, shaping community and corporate behaviour, and fostering public support for sustainable initiatives, with a strong ambition to ensure procedural and distributional justice within their localities.

However, our findings highlight that competitive funding structures, austerity-induced reductions in public sector capacity, and the increasing debt burdens of councils have systematically reinforced the uneven ability of LAs to participate as anchors in transition governance, thereby undermining distributional justice across boroughs. Hence, the potential of LAs to act as equitable and effective anchor institutions depends not only on progressive place-based governance systems but also on distributional outcomes determined at national scale. The findings therefore demonstrate a clear need for restorative action at the national level to address uneven distributions of fiscal resources and institutional capacity both across LAs and among residents.

The article contributes to three bodies of scholarship. First, within state rescaling

debates (Lobao et al., 2018; Lowndes and Gardner, 2016; Traill and Cumbers, 2025), it demonstrates that rescaling processes can undermine the institutional foundations necessary for transition governance. Second, it advances debates on just transitions and anchor institutions (Bulkeley et al., 2014; Colenbrander et al., 2018; Lacey-Barnacle et al., 2023; McCauley and Heffron, 2018) by showing how the distributive, procedural, and restorative dimensions of climate justice are co-conditioned through multiscale governance arrangements. In doing so, it situates both the possibilities and limitations of anchor-led place-based governance, showing that anchoring agency is itself unevenly distributed and dependent upon broader redistributive and restorative mechanisms operating across scales.

Third, the article contributes to scholarship on urban experimentation in place-based governance (Copeland, 2024; Creasy et al., 2021; Kythreotis et al., 2023; Nciri and Levenda, 2020; Sareen and Waagsaether, 2023; Wahlund and Palm, 2022) by foregrounding the distributional conditions of participation, showing how distributional and restorative dimensions underpin participatory justice by conditioning who can participate and whose interests prevail. While existing research has primarily focused on institutional design and experimentation within scalar politics, this article shows that participation in transition governance is also materially conditioned by uneven geographies of distribution. Identifying how participation and distribution co-condition one another across scales is therefore essential for widening the opportunity space of place-based governance.

In practical terms, the findings underscore that enabling LAs to act as genuine anchor institutions requires rebalancing fiscal and governance relations across scales. Strengthening public sector capacity, reforming funding mechanisms, and embedding justice considerations in national and regional

policy design are essential for scaling up locally grounded transitions into systemic ones. Without redistributive and restorative mechanisms at higher scales, local governments will remain limited to managing transition within rather than across their localities. By addressing the historically produced inequalities between places, restorative interventions – including debt relief, long-term climate settlements or targeted capacity-building programmes – expand the scope for meaningful participation in transition governance and strengthen the foundations for more just transition outcomes. Such action could include a multiyear, needs-based climate funding settlement for LAs, allocated according to indicators of fiscal capacity, deprivation, housing need and decarbonisation requirements, rather than through short-term competitive bidding processes that favour already well-resourced councils.

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Note

1. We use the terms local authority and council interchangeably in this article.

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