

# Green Society Proliferation: How are Cambridge Organisations Meaningfully Addressing the Climate Crisis?

Pasha Taylor\*

## I. Introduction.

"Human-induced climate change is the largest, most pervasive threat to the natural environment and societies the world has ever experienced."<sup>1</sup> Wealthy countries and large corporations are disproportionately responsible for the climate crisis, with much of their economic success being linked to environmental malpractice. Under the current neoliberal economic world order, it becomes apparent that global actors and key contributors to atmospheric pollution will not naturally sway towards environmentally friendly operations. However, the consequences of a warming planet are increasingly affecting our physical health, ability to grow food, housing, safety, and work.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, climate change is increasingly affecting people's mental health. 'Eco-anxiety' is a growing problem, describing the rising sentiment of hopelessness and helplessness regarding the state of our planet and what a single person can do.<sup>3</sup> There needs to be a revolutionary 'green transition' away from 'business as usual' to achieve some form of environmental security and justice. But how should people mobilise against climate change and what impact can individuals have?

Globally, a diverse range of social mobilisations have arisen, operating across different spatial scales, and with different approaches to climate-induced issues. This article uses the Cambridge Climate Society (CCS) societies directory to outline the variation of green societies within Cambridge, categorising them by spatial scope and broad purpose—that is, whether the society operates at the college, university, or regional level, and whether the society is connective, action-based, educational, or research-based. This article focuses on three 'action-based' organisations: Clare Goes Green, Plant-Based Cambridge and Circular Cambridge. The attributes and impacts of these organisations will be assessed and used to support a general discussion regarding green societies.

## II. Context.

Cambridge, as an institution, a collection of colleges, and a city, has a responsibility to respond to the climate crisis. Cambridge is a city in the county of Cambridgeshire, in East England, built on the bank of the river Cam. It is known for being the 'home of Cambridge University'. In 2022/23, the city's total emissions were 556,800 tCO<sub>2e</sub>,<sup>4</sup> of which the University operational estate location and market-based scope 1 and 2 energy and fuel use accounted for 73,919 tCO<sub>2e</sub>.<sup>5</sup> The Cambridge City Council outlines its

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\* Geography Tripos Student, Churchill College, University of Cambridge

<sup>1</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. "Climate Change the Greatest Threat the World Has Ever Faced, UN Expert Warns." 21 October 2022.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. "What Is Climate Change?"

<sup>3</sup> Lowe, Sarah, and Anthony Leiserowitz. "Yale Experts Explain Climate Anxiety." *Yale Sustainability*, 13 Mar. 2023.

<sup>4</sup> National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory. *Local Authority GHG Map*.

<sup>5</sup> Cambridge University. *2022-23 Highlights*. 2024.

commitment to reduce its direct carbon emissions (scope 1) to net zero by 2030.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile Cambridge University is more ambitious in scope but more sparing with time, with the main target of reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions across its entire investment portfolio by 2038 and becoming absolute carbon zero on all energy-related emissions (scope 1 and 2) by 2048. As separate structural entities, the University and Council have different paths to reduce their respective impacts on the environment. The pursuit of decarbonisation and sustainability are also supported by several grassroots 'green societies' and individual environmentalists.

### III. Cambridge Climate Society (CCS).

Cambridge Climate Society (CCS) describe themselves as "the student hub for all things climate at Cambridge." They organise events to raise awareness of climate research and policy and run educational programs, such as the Academy Programme and mentoring sessions. They also coordinate campaigns and support green efforts across colleges through their new Action and Community teams. For the purposes of this analysis, CCS can be categorised as a 'connective' organisation (further explained below). CCS maintains a database of Cambridge organisations relevant to the climate crisis, with 95 organisations currently listed. These come under several sub-headings, focusing on topics ranging from green technology to plant-based food.

### IV. Methods.

The societies in the CCS database can be categorised into four general roles: research, education, action, (directly tackling impacts or contributions to climate change), and connection (facilitating communication to accelerate and strengthen responses). They can also be divided by the scale at which they operate: at the college-scale, the university-scale or Cambridge-wide.

Many societies transcend spatial or functional boundaries. For example, the CCS itself is a connective, action-based and educational organisation. Hence, there is some subjectivity in terms of grouping and labelling organisations; keyword analysis has been undertaken to increase the accuracy of this process. The methodology of coding qualitative data from the mission statements of registered climate organisations, has allowed for the 'connective' categorisation of the society, as there are greater references to connectivity over education or action.

The Cambridge Climate Society connects students to climate initiatives, networks, resources and projects, serving as a focal point for everything climate at the University of Cambridge. The society is open to students at all levels of climate engagement, and events are free of charge. As current and future contributors to the global climate sector, our principles are guided by the Paris Agreement, and by the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We're dedicated to bringing people together, fostering new ideas, and inspiring action around the most important issue of our time. We are a student committed, generously supported by an accomplished advisory board, and several sponsors.

Connective  
Educational  
Action-based

Figure 1: Methodology.

<sup>6</sup> Cambridge City Council. *Cambridge City Council Climate Change Strategy 2021-2026*. n.d.

The modal, overarching categories have been identified for the following societies:

Category	Meaning	Key words in mission statement	Organisations
<b>Connective</b>	Organisations that provide social infrastructure, sharing ideas about climate change. These societies may also facilitate inter-disciplinary interaction. Societies in this category allow for the mobilisation of individuals under a collective group, an essential precursor for effective action.	'people', 'relationships', 'transfer', 'exchange', 'platform', 'bridges', 'Forum', 'interface', 'interdisciplinary', 'gateway', 'events', 'networking', 'sharing', 'co-ordinate'	(College) Green Society of Wolfson College Homerton College Environmental Society
			(University wide) Cambridge University Science Policy Exchange (CUSPE) Cambridge University Energy Technology Society (CUETS) Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation Center for Sustainable Finance Cambridge Food Security Forum Cambridge University Vegan Society Cambridge Institute for Sustainable Leadership CambPlants Hub Cambridge University Environmental Consulting Society Cambridge Climate & Sustainability Forum Cambridge Hub Cambridge University Energy Network Engineers Without Borders Cambridge Center for Global Equality
<b>Action-based</b>	Organisations which promote and enforce resistance to conventional business, political, social or education practices or that directly tackle the immediate and distant impacts of climate change. For example, organisations which advocate for reducing consumption and waste, or organisations which hold public demonstrations to drive top-down changes, would fit into this category.	'project', 'initiative', 'agenda', 'impact', 'service', 'waste-reduction', 'transformative', , 'initiative', 'solutions', 'ethical', 'just', 'community', 'equality', 'justice',  verbs: 'grow', 'refill', 'reduce', 'accelerate', 'campaign', 'boycott', 'eradicate', 'community-led', 'campaign', 'develop', 'create'	(College) Clare Goes Green SCOOP Cambridge Zero Waste Shop Cambridge Edible Garden Student Switch Off (SSO) Newnham Environmental Justice Society Christ's Climate Justice Society
			(University wide) Plant-Based Universities Cambridge Cambridge Conservation Initiative The Equipment Sharing Project Cambridge Green Challenge Engage For Change Cambridge University Wildlife Conservation Society Ethical Affairs (CUSU) Cambridge Climate Justice Boycott Banks' Destruction (Oxbridge) Green Impact Challenge Cambridge Zero Cambridge Development Initiative Smart Cambridge Cambridge Climate Justice
<b>Education</b>	Organisations which increase public awareness of climate change. This can	'Raise-awareness', 'knowledge', 'learning', 'training',	(College) N/A
			(University wide) Centre for Climate Repair Cambridge Natural History Society (CNHS) Effective Climate Change Mitigation Cambridge Department of Land Economy Center for Sustainable Development Conservation Internship Scheme

	enable mitigative action on a greater scale and pressure institutions to address the issue.	'internships', 'consulting'	Voiz (Regional) Cambridge Carbon Literacy Project The Switch Healthy Planet Cambridge Cambridge Carbon Footprint
Research-based	Organisations which facilitate or develop climate research. Research helps us better understand and predict climate change. This knowledge is crucial. For example, we can evaluate the stability of certain systems (e.g. agriculture), such that we can adapt to potential to risks.	'academics', 'scholars', 'find solutions', 'mechanisms', 'access', 'policy', 'influence', 'inform', 'alternatives', 'data'	(College) Wolfson College Interdisciplinary Research Hub in Sustainability & Conservation
			(University wide) Energy Interdisciplinary Research Centre Conservation Research Institute Cambridge University Marine Conservation Society Cambridge Nuclear Energy Center Cambridge Center for Alternative Finance Winton Programme for the Physics of Sustainability Strategic Network for Sensor Research at Cambridge University Climate Change and Earth-Ocean-Atmosphere Systems AI for Environmental Risk (AI4ER) Centre for Risk Studies Energy Efficient Cities Initiative Center for the Study of Existential Risk Cambridge Centre for Climate Science Department of Earth Sciences Cambridge Living Laboratory Cambridge Global Food Security
			(regional) Cambridge Circular Plastics Centre Pesticide-Free Cambridge Transition Cambridge Crop Science Centre

## Distribution of Climate Societies Across Different Scales and Broad Aims

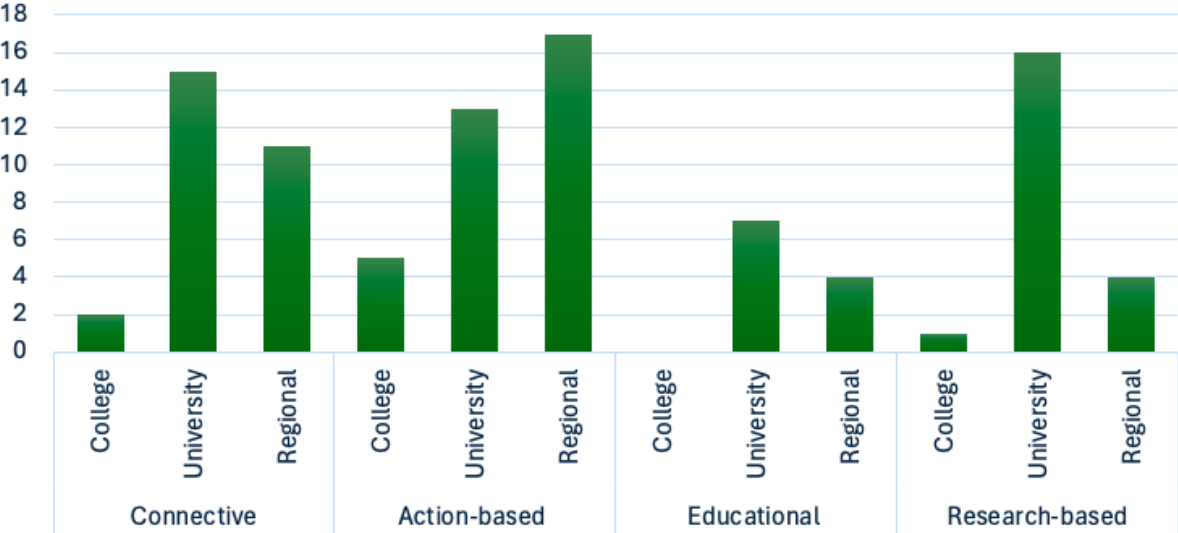


Figure 2: Results.

## V. Discussion and Results.

The data acquired from this coding methodology suggests that connective, educational, and research-based societies are most likely to operate at the University scale, drawing on the human, financial and technological resources of Cambridge University. The organisations that take direct action against the impacts and causes of climate change are dominant at a regional scale. This suggests recognition of the significance of mass mobilisation for meaningful change. Seeing as Cambridge University is embedded within the region, there is often cooperation and collaboration with the University to enhance regional efforts, presenting scales of overlap. The intersectionality between scales and categories of aims presents a limitation in this methodology.

Only seven of the thirty-one Cambridge Colleges have an established climate society. However, due to the smaller scale of operations, it is likely that many college-based societies are not mentioned in the CCS database. On a similar note, climate societies often fluctuate in terms of their cohesiveness and ability to create action, such that of the mentioned societies, some may be redundant. This presents a clear limitation to using this database, to which a solution would involve further inquiry into college-based initiatives. It would be a useful exercise for CCS to conduct another society audit to update this information.

## VI. Scale and Perceived Impact.

When assessing the sheer amount of climate organisations, it is difficult to evaluate whether quantity has overshadowed quality. Given the diverse aims and operations of each society, there is no collective indicator which can be used to assess an organisation's impact or effect in addressing climate change. By comparing the targets, methods, media and institutional recognition, and scope of organisations, we can demonstrate the diversity both amongst, and in some cases, within these societies. The following table demonstrates an analytical breakdown of three action-based societies, Clare Goes Green, Plant-Based Cambridge and Circular Cambridge, operating at the collegiate, institutional, and regional scale. These organisations are largely perceived as successful in carrying out their aims. In part they have been chosen for their up-to-date presence on social media and online.

	Targets	Methods and Examples	Recognition of Impact	Scope
<b>Clare Goes Green</b>	<p>Creating a space for climate engagement and learning.</p> <p>Reducing Clare's environmental impact and carbon footprint. Key areas in which this can be tackled is through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- removing ruminants from the buttery.</li> <li>- composting</li> <li>- heating reductions</li> </ul>	<p>(1) Social media campaigns</p> <p>(2) Society representative in attendance of college staff meetings</p> <p>(3) Student campaigning, e.g.: environmental posters</p> <p>(4) Challenges, e.g. - January 'VeganuClarey Challenge'</p> <p>(5) Events to improve educational awareness</p> <p>(6) Project to monitor energy use</p> <p>(7) Participating in the Pesticides Free Cambridge Campaign.</p>	<p>(1) Helped the college win the University's Green Impact Competition</p> <p>(2) Played a role in Clare's receipt of the Platinum Cambridge Green Impact Award.</p>	<p>Collegiate and individual level</p> <p>Affiliated with Clare Growers Association</p> <p>Long term aim to create University-wide impact.</p> <p>Helping to set up green societies at other colleges.</p>

<p><b>Plant-Based Cambridge</b></p>	<p>For the University to switch to plant-based catering to reduce the environmental impact of catering across the University and divest from animal agriculture.</p>	<p>(1) Policy motions and dialogue at the University, College, and departmental scale.  (2) Panel events  (3) Film screenings, e.g.: 'The Smell of Money' + Q&amp;A with Writer / Producer Jamie Berger  (4) Works with colleges to plan plant-based menus  (5) Student campaigns and lobbying  (6) Open letters addressed to universities  (7) Plant-based formals</p>	<p>Plant-based Universities campaign was nominated for an Earthshot Prize by Generation Vegan. It has also been shortlisted under Campaign Impact by the Cambridge Students' Awards 2023. International media recognition with interviews on local and national TV.</p>	<p>Plant-based Universities Cambridge works with the central Plant-Based Universities campaign and is supported by Animal Rising. It works with the Student Union (SU), college caterers, university departments and hopes to work with the University endowment fund.</p>
<p><b>Circular Cambridge</b></p>	<p>The reduction of 'throw-away culture' in order to decrease individuals' carbon footprints. The organisation targets waste and consumption through promoting repairing and recycling goods. It also serves as a creative and social forum with social and educational events.</p>	<p>(1) Repair Café, at various places within the region, such as Trumpington, Ely, Newnham, and St Ives.  (2) Educational events and training. For example, they have thermal imaging training and online training on 'How to run a Swish'.  (3) Events such as 'the fix fest' and a sustainable fashion show.  (4) Information sessions. Eg: in November 2023 there was a session for 'Local Leaders and Local Government'  (5) Directory of places in the Cambridge region where people can access reduced waste shopping, repairers, second hand goods and skills exchanges.</p> <p>There are multiple events a week, demonstrating organisational commitment to making an impact.</p>	<p>Media recognition of the organisation, for example, in 2019 alone, representatives wrote articles in Cambridge Independent and South Cambs Magazine, and spoken on the radio and in BBC podcasts such as 'Shop Well for Less'</p>	<p>Circular Cambridge is a project of the local charity Cambridge Carbon Footprint. The charity operates other projects such as Net Zero Now and Open Eco Homes which have more refined aims. Active participation in consultation and forums.</p>

## VII. Discussion.

The outlined societies all target different things and carry out their efforts using different mechanisms. Across the three organisations, similarities lie in recognising the importance of social events and community engagement. There is evidence of communication beyond the co-ordination of climate-based action, demonstrating the importance of the 'social' as a means to address the 'environmental'. Campaigning is also a common method used, highlighting the grassroots nature of green societies and the emphasis placed on engaging with policy makers to enforce top-down change through bottom-up action. A notable aspect about these three chosen organisations is that as the scale increases, from operating within a college to across a region, so too does the specificity of the aims of the society. Clare Goes Green has a broad target of reducing the college's carbon footprint, which can include a wide variety of emissions. This is addressed through a similarly large range of projects and initiatives, from composting to menu alterations. Meanwhile, Plant-Based Cambridge and Circular Cambridge have more refined operations in terms of prioritising single issues, of meat consumption and waste.

## VIII. College-Level.

One of the key things that has enabled the success of Clare Goes Green is the access the society has had to statistical findings regarding the emissions of their college. This is through the work of Joey Bream, who highlighted the short and long-term changes that can be made in the college, with the respective impacts these changes could have. By knowing what to focus on, the society can set principal targets and direct their campaigning efforts to achieve maximum impact. This allows for focus within the overarching aims of the society.

Bream has expanded the scope of his work, beyond Clare College, creating a more general College Carbon Impact estimation tool. He calculates that a 25 tCO<sub>2e</sub> saving would lower a college's carbon emissions by 1%.<sup>7</sup>

Such quantified impact reports are extremely useful. For example, electrifying heating was found to be 100 times more effective at reducing emissions than removing tumble dryers. One proposed emission reduction tactic would be to do online interviews to avoid the carbon cost of travelling to the college for a face-to-face interview, as well as otherwise disincentivising students from taking flights. Even more surprisingly, this could have the same high impact as electrifying heating, despite costing significantly less. This information can be useful to college-based green societies, providing guidance on what to prioritise in terms of campaigning and mobilising action at this scale. Colleges do have decarbonisation plans and data on their emissions, although they are not in the public domain. Students must request this information in order to integrate it into their strategy as a green organisation. This is reliant on the engagement and commitment of the student-body, and as individuals continue through their University course, continuity of the Green Society requires the participation of the next cohort. Other contingent factors include the financial situation of each college and the structure of the board, as some Green Societies face bureaucratic blocks when trying to gain funding or legitimacy.

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<sup>7</sup> Bream, Joey. *Scope B: College Carbon Impact Estimation Tool*. 3 May 2023.

Clare Goes Green advocates for greater college-level Green Organisations, which could coordinate intercollegiate movements to prompt a university-wide response. The society believes that starting at the college level is important in that it creates spaces of climate engagement, where students can grasp the scope of the crisis without leaving their familiar environment. By adopting a bottom-up approach at the college-scale, students can impact operations, which if done by all colleges, can result in significant University-wide change. Clare is therefore organising workshops and events to help other colleges establish Green Organisations.

### **IX. Larger-Scale.**

Plant-Based Cambridge is effective in creating support for the campaign, as proved by the successful lobbying efforts made last year which resulted in the Student Union voting in favour of supporting a transition of the University Catering Services in 2023. The group's efficacy can be attributed to the organisation's singular focus. Similarly, Circular Cambridge also prioritises a single aspect of human consumption which is contributing to the climate crisis. By celebrating "progressive ways to design, manufacture, access, repair and reuse," the organisation aims to reduce demand for resources by extending the life cycle of goods and therefore minimise environmental impacts.

There appears to be a trade-off between the expanse of aims and the scale of operation, in which successful climate societies at a college level can afford to be more inclusive in terms of what they want to achieve. Impactful action-based initiatives at a university or regional scale society, in this case, are seen to commit to a more specific approach under a larger umbrella organisation. (Circular Cambridge is a branch of the Cambridge Carbon Footprint charity and Plant Based Universities is a campaign under Animal Rebellion).

Another reason for the size-specificity trade-off could be that smaller sized colleges may be less bureaucratic and allow societies to have a greater stake in general operations. Furthermore, at larger scales it may be more administratively effective and efficient if projects have a clear and defined aim.

### **X. Conclusion.**

This article has presented a broad exploration into the green initiatives operating in Cambridge. It has highlighted that what makes an effective green society is highly dependent on the scale of operation and the issues of importance to the members. College initiatives present an opportunity to address a wide range of components which make up their systematic functioning, while societies operating at a greater scale tend to consist of specific projects or campaigns which target singular issues, demonstrating a 'divide and conquer' approach toward the causes and effects of climate change. The overarching aims of projects usually align with a broader organisational target, such as the net-zero aims of the University and the Council or the Plant Based Universities campaign.

Having divided societies into four main categories: action-based, connective, research-based and educational, one can argue that action-based societies create the most tangible impact in terms of directly addressing the climate crisis. However, there is a need for organisations across the four categories to coordinate an effective climate response. Research is needed to improve knowledge and



awareness of the crisis and to deduce the best ways to approach adaptation and mitigation efforts. Education is needed to fuel action as people become aware of the technicalities of climate change. Connective organisations provide a forum for people to discover each of these opportunities.

Participation in Green Societies is beneficial regardless of the scale or particular aim. Collaboration of individuals towards a common interest of climate change has formative impacts which can have implications on the rest of an individual's life. Being part of a greater movement can help ease eco-anxiety and benefit mental and physical health. Therefore, quantifying the impact that Green Societies have is next to impossible, such that any mobilisation of interest in the environment should be encouraged.

The CCS Directory is a useful resource for discovering these societies and could benefit from an update. However, it is a valid argument that the large number of societies across Cambridge could be overwhelming, particularly to the large number of incoming students. It is difficult to assess the issues which each society targets, and indeed whether they are active or effective. A good next step would be to develop a more focused introduction to the organisations around Cambridge.