# Engineers must deliver now: from COP26 pledges to projects that cut carbon and curb flooding



In the run-up to COP26 in Glasgow, climate change and its consequences have dominated the news agenda, underscoring that the debate is no longer only about policy but also about delivery on the ground. The ICE feature argues that civil engineers must step forward as leaders in this transition, tying practical infrastructure decisions to the broader goals of decarbonisation and resilience. The same week, city authorities warned that London faces mounting flood risk: a quarter of the capital’s rail stations, one in five schools and nearly half of its hospitals could be exposed to surface water flooding in future wetter years, with the city’s underground network at risk of becoming uncomfortably hot for extended periods if temperatures continue to rise. Taken together, these threads illustrate a single point with growing clarity: the time for engineers to act is now, not in some distant future.

The message from the prime minister’s UN address and the accompanying policy frame is stark, and the reference point for civil engineers is practical action, not rhetoric alone. In that speech, described by BBC coverage as a turning point for humanity, leaders were urged to pursue bold climate actions—such as ensuring zero-emission vehicles are on sale by 2040, ending coal power by 2040 in the developing world and 2030 in developed economies, and halting biodiversity loss by 2030—alongside a wider push to accelerate the clean-energy transition and rethink infrastructure investment. The ICE piece links that political urgency to the engineering profession’s remit, framing it through a set of actionable commitments designed to move from discussion to deliverable projects on the ground. At the same time, the ICE briefing on the six ways civil engineers can act on climate change provides a practical playbook: treat this as an emergency, bring carbon into every conversation, understand and influence end users, design and build for the right outcomes, pursue creative solutions, and take responsibility for resilience. The aim is to embed carbon considerations in procurement, fuel broader stakeholder engagement, and accelerate the pace of decarbonisation in the built environment.

Yet the road from aspiration to action is complicated by public pressure and partisan debates about permitting, funding and retrofit. Insulate Britain’s protests on the M25—gluing hands to the road to demand faster action on home insulation and fuel poverty—expose how political and social pressures can intersect with engineering challenges. Court injunctions and heightened public scrutiny have become part of the landscape, while city-level analyses of risk illustrate the scale of the task. In London, for example, the mayoral briefing warns that a substantial portion of critical infrastructure and public services could be exposed to flooding in the coming years, and that heat in the Underground could become an annual, multi-week hazard if adaptation measures lag. Against this backdrop, the ICE’s State of the Nation 2021 work emphasises the need for immediate, tangible progress—the six actions are not a theoretical framework but a call to translate climate ambitions into end-to-end projects that end users can see and benefit from. As the project leader and ICE president has put it in the ongoing Shaping Zero narrative, engineers must answer the question: what are you going to do?

In this context, COP26 appears less a single event and more a catalyst for a sustained shift in professional practice. The conference’s programme—covering finance, energy, nature, transport and the broad architecture of the climate economy—highlights the multi-disciplinary collaboration required to translate policy into project-level outcomes. Schedule highlights and side events emphasise how engineering decisions intersect with finance, regulation and community engagement, underscoring the need for civil engineers to articulate the end-user value of low-carbon design and to collaborate with policymakers and clients to accelerate delivery. For engineers, the path forward is concrete: embed carbon metrics in procurement choices, elevate public and end-user understanding of low-carbon solutions, and design infrastructure that performs under climate stress while supporting social and economic resilience.

In short, the profession faces a dual imperative: accelerate decarbonisation in the built environment while strengthening the resilience of critical infrastructure to climate risks. The evidence from city analyses, protest discourse, and policy discourse converges on a single conclusion. It is not enough to talk about climate action; engineers must lead with practical projects, improvements in planning and procurement, and clear communication with end users. The moment calls for leadership at every level of the supply chain—from the design studio to the operating theatre of public services—so that the ambitions announced at COP26 translate into safer, more sustainable, and better-prepared communities.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.ice.org.uk/news-views-insights/inside-infrastructure/why-now-is-the-time-for-civil-engineers-to-act-on-climate-change), [[4]](https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/mayor-warns-londoners-in-basements-about-flooding)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.ice.org.uk/news-views-insights/inside-infrastructure/why-now-is-the-time-for-civil-engineers-to-act-on-climate-change), [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-58657887), [[5]](https://www.ice.org.uk/engineering-resources/briefing-sheets/six-ways-for-civil-engineers-to-act-on-climate-change)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-essex-58721909), [[6]](https://www.ice.org.uk/news-views-insights/inside-infrastructure/why-now-is-the-time-for-civil-engineers-to-act-on-climate-change)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ice.org.uk/news-views-insights/inside-infrastructure/why-now-is-the-time-for-civil-engineers-to-act-on-climate-change> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-58657887> - BBC News reports Prime Minister Boris Johnson telling the United Nations that COP26 must be a turning point for humanity, urging fellow leaders to adopt bold climate actions. The address links science-led urgency with market-led solutions, and sets out global commitments: only zero-emission vehicles on sale by 2040; end coal power by 2040 in the developing world and by 2030 in developed economies; and halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. The speech pairs seriousness with humour, including a quip about Kermit the Frog. The piece situates Johnson’s rhetoric within preparations for COP26 in Glasgow and the wider policy debate.
3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-essex-58721909> - BBC News covers Insulate Britain protesters gluing their hands to the M25 during demonstrations and disrupting traffic at junctions, including J30 near Thurrock. Reporting details the arrests of several protesters and the police response, and notes court injunctions banning road obstruction. The piece situates the protests within a broader campaign calling for UK home insulation and faster action on fuel poverty and climate change. It captures public frustration, law enforcement measures, and ongoing civil-disobedience tactics used by the group as part of wider climate activism in late 2021. The article mentions government injunctions curbing disruptive actions and policy tensions today.
4. <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/mayor-warns-londoners-in-basements-about-flooding> - London City Hall analysis shows that without urgent action London faces rising flood risk. A citywide briefing indicates that quarter of rail stations, one in five schools and nearly half of London’s hospitals could be exposed to surface water flooding in the future, alongside hundreds of thousands of homes and workplaces. The figures reflect risks from heavy rainfall, river flood events and urban drainage challenges. The briefing underlines the need for resilient infrastructure, better flood planning and adaptation measures as climate impacts intensify. It emphasises the Mayor’s commitment to reducing emissions and pursuing resilience alongside growth across the city region.
5. <https://www.ice.org.uk/engineering-resources/briefing-sheets/six-ways-for-civil-engineers-to-act-on-climate-change> - ICE's briefing summarises the 2021 State of the Nation report, assessing the UK's infrastructure carbon footprint and readiness to act on climate change. The document highlights that infrastructure generates a large share of emissions and that the industry must respond with urgency. It sets out six actions for civil engineers: treat this as an emergency; bring carbon into every conversation; understand and influence end users; design and build for the right outcomes; strive for creative solutions; and be responsible for resilience. The piece emphasises collaboration with policymakers, clients and end users to accelerate decarbonisation and climate resilience in practice today.
6. <https://www.ice.org.uk/news-views-insights/inside-infrastructure/why-now-is-the-time-for-civil-engineers-to-act-on-climate-change> - ICE's feature argues that climate action demands immediate leadership from civil engineers, linking ICE's SoN to COP26. It notes the urgent need to mainstream low-carbon design, better decision making, and public engagement. The piece quotes the six actions from the SoN and situates them within a broader campaign to accelerate decarbonisation in the built environment. It frames engineers as custodians of infrastructure and climate resilience, urging practitioners to move from talk to action by embedding carbon considerations in procurement, end-user understanding, and resilience planning. The article stresses collaboration with clients and policymakers to translate ambition into practical projects across sectors.
7. <https://unfccc.int/cop26/schedule> - UN Climate Change Conference COP26 schedule page outlines the Glasgow event's programme, listing thematic days and public engagement alongside negotiation sessions. The schedule confirms COP26's occurrence in Glasgow in late 2021 and directs participants through finance, energy, youth, nature and transport themes. It emphasises that a blend of political negotiations and side events will shape the ambition and action required to meet the 1.5C target. The page functions as a practical guide to attendees and a snapshot of the conference structure, illustrating how the COP26 process seeks to mobilise finance, technology and policy reform towards a fair, resilient transition globally.