HUMANIST CLIMATE ACTION
MAY 2026 NEWSLETTER

COME AND SEE US IN BOURNEMOUTH

It used to be the Annual Conference, in 2017 it became the Convention, and now it's a Festival of Humanism, but by any name it's a great opportunity to come together, talk and re-energise, and this year it will be at the Bournemouth International Centre from Friday 12th to Sunday 14th June. As in previous years we'll have a Humanist Climate Action stall for you to visit, and we'd love to see you. Please drop by. We want to hear from you what you think HCA's priorities should be in the next year and what you think are the most important issues.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND FLOODING

A theme of our recent newsletters has been how best to talk to climate change sceptics – not only those who deny that it is happening, but also those who think that tackling it should not be a priority, that it is something we cannot afford. We have suggested that one approach is to focus on the social and economic effects of climate change which are already with us. In our previous newsletter we looked at the consequences of climate change for human health. Here we look at the effects of climate change and increasingly extreme weather events on flooding and home insurance. Geoff Sallis, who is a member of the steering committee of Humanist Climate Action, lives in Tewkesbury and writes from direct experience of the catastrophic flooding there on 20 July 2007.

The Impacts of the 2007 Flood in Tewkesbury

The primary cause was the extreme rainfall during the summer, which led to the rivers Severn and Avon overflowing their banks. Additionally, the surrounding hills accelerated the run-off process, leading to an even greater influx of water into the river systems. To add to this, it's estimated that the increased urban development and its surrounding areas contributed significantly. By increasing impermeable surfaces (roads and buildings), less rainwater could be absorbed into the ground, increasing the volume of run-off.

The social impacts of the Tewkesbury floods were profound and multifaceted, with thousands of residents displaced as over 3,500 homes were evacuated. The health risks posed by the floodwaters were significant, including threats of waterborne diseases and limited access to healthcare facilities due to the inundated infrastructure. The community faced considerable disruption, with schools closing down and local events being cancelled, affecting the town's social fabric.

Economically, the floods inflicted substantial damage. The cost of damages to properties and infrastructure amounted to millions of pounds and local businesses, especially those reliant on tourism, faced severe significant economic losses. The flood's aftermath saw a surge in insurance claims and a need for considerable investment in reconstruction and recovery efforts.

Environmentally, the floods had far-reaching impacts. The local ecosystems experienced significant disruption, affecting both wildlife and plant life. Water pollution levels increased, with run-off from agricultural lands and overflowing sewage systems contaminating homes and waterways.

The financial, personal and environmental costs of the climate crisis

According to Metrological Office statistics, the winter of 2025-26 was the wettest since 1836 for the West Midlands, Cornwall and Leicestershire. The trend is widespread, with various UK counties recording seasonal rainfall rates among the top 10 on record.

In the UK only Scotland had a drier-than-average winter, with this forming part of a longer-term UK trend of generally wetter winter weather, driven by the climate crisis.

The Association of British Insurers (ABI) says 'adverse weather claims' – such as floods and storms – are responsible for an increasing proportion of the total costs insurers pay out per year. In 2025, the amount spent on flood claims rose by 38% to £312m.

With flood costs and the numbers of homes at risk on the rise, more of us could find ourselves forking out extra for home insurance. Between January and April 2025, claims for weather-related damage to homes and possessions topped £200m, surpassing the previous record from 2022. The ABI said the average claim was £30k.

Data from comparison website Compare the Market shows how much this can add to your annual premium. According to an analysis of the data by *Which?*, "If your home has flooded before, you could pay £437 a year for your cover – £239 more than the UK average annual premium of £198."

Region	Average cost	previously flooded	previously flooded %
East Anglia	£218	£446	+105%
East Midlands	£179	£473	+164%
East of England	£160	£342	+114%
Greater London	£297	£669	+125%
North-east	£157	£360	+129%
North-west	£176	£430	+144%
Northern Ireland	£483	£754	+56%
Scotland	£202	£408	+102%
South-east	£222	£507	+128%
South-west	£188	£443	+136%
Wales	£187	£425	+127%
West Midlands	£174	£400	+130%
Yorkshire and the Humber	£179	£379	+111%

Data source: Compare the Market, January 2026.

The flooding of 2007, then, was not a one-off event. According to Parliament's Environmental Audit Committee, there have been five major flood events since 2007, causing an estimated £7.6 billion in damages. The Committee's Report published last October said:

> Flooding is one of the UK's most significant climate related risks, affecting thousands of communities and expected to worsen as global temperatures rise. It causes

economic disruption, damage to homes and infrastructure, and long-term social and emotional impacts.

The impacts of climate change, it's clear, are not vague future possibilities. They are with us here and now.

Geoff Sallis

INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS: A REASON FOR OPTIMISM?

Comments from one of the speakers at the National Emergency Briefing last November led me, via a fairly circuitous route, to a document released at around the same time from the Net Zero Lawyers Alliance. It has the intriguing title: *Sustainable Fiduciary Duty: How fiduciary duties can be a key to escaping the climate prisoners' dilemma*.

This 80-page technical study is written by lawyers for legal and other professionals in the investment community. Here's my (non-lawyer's) interpretation:

Greenhouse gas emissions and nature loss are increasing, with consequently increasing risks to our economy and broader social stability. Despite this, pension funds and other institutional investors are continuing to invest in projects with high carbon emissions. The accepted approach to managing the risks involved ignores many of the possible consequences of the climate crisis. It favours investments in fossil fuels and other high-emission products, while undervaluing clean technologies and investments in companies or projects that will generate positive climate impacts.

Unfortunately these financial institutions have no incentive to change. Individual organisations are reluctant to modify their climate conservative financial models, unless everyone else is doing the same. This is the 'prisoners dilemma' in the title of the study. So they effectively ignore the growing risks from extreme weather, flooding, droughts, wildfires,

heatwaves, nature loss, food and water insecurity and attendant social disruption, despite the fact that these are risks that threaten the value of their own investments and their broader portfolios of assets.

But, the authors argue, the directors and trustees of pension funds, asset managers, investment vehicles and companies (called fiduciaries in the jargon) have a duty to act in the long-term interests of the beneficiaries of their investments (often you and me as owners of pension funds, and investment vehicles). And, as the climate crisis worsens, the potential consequences of not doing so are becoming more serious. Litigation and legislative liabilities are looming, alongside the possibility of damage to balance sheets and cashflows. Happily, the law provides a solution. Investments and policies designed to minimise further climate damage are in the best interest of all beneficiaries in both the medium and longer term – and therefore fiduciaries have a duty to modify their investment approach accordingly. They have a responsibility to integrate climate and nature considerations into investment decisions, because that will lower the potentially huge risks and costs of an unmitigated climate crisis and thus help preserve the value of their assets against steep losses.

No new legislation is needed, but collective action as well as individual action is essential. The ample evidence of increasing climate risk means that applying and enforcing the existing principles behind the duties of fiduciaries can drive this collective action. The investment community can generate a new, more enlightened approach to the climate reality at the same time as protecting their institutional interests.

This report identifies five pillars for corporate action, including the avoidance of investment in new unabated high-emission projects, and taking the positive impacts of mitigating climate change into account when assessing investment proposals. Together they offer a way of changing how important investment decisions are made and aligning them more closely with a sustainable future.

Let’s hope it works.

John Burns

THE PEOPLE'S EMERGENCY BRIEFING

The National Emergency Briefing referred to above was an event in Westminster in November of last year, introduced by Chris Packham and chaired by Professor Mike Berners Lee, with presentations from prominent academics in their fields. It set out the implications of climate and nature breakdown, and the increasing risks posed to our health, food systems, infrastructure, national security and the economy. The presentations can be seen online.

They have now been distilled into a 50-minute film called the People's Emergency Briefing, which is being shown by local organisations across the country. It's a powerful film. It sets out to shock, and it succeeds. It conveys, better than anything else I've seen, the extreme severity of the crisis we face as a result of the cumulative impacts of climate change and the destruction of nature. But it doesn't just shock, it also ends with a very clear message that the solutions are available and can work if the will is there.

Hosting a screening would be a good thing for Humanist local groups to do. Please consider it. Why not host it in Great Big Green Week, coming up 6-14 June? There is information online about how to arrange a screening, and it comes with guidance about how to facilitate a discussion after people have watched the film.

There is also another action you can take. The limitation of screenings arranged by local organisations is that they are likely to attract people who are already convinced. What we need is a prime-time **televised emergency briefing** across all the main channels, to reach as wide an audience as possible. Please could you write to your MP and ask them to support the Parliamentary Call for a televised briefing?

Richard Norman

UK DATA CENTRES: WHAT NEXT?

UK Data Centres what next?

AI is bringing mind bending changes to the world and we will all be impacted. One of the obvious concerns is the phenomenal energy use of data centres used to power AI and the environmental impact of these centres.

The UK has around 450 large data centres. In September 2024, the UK Government designated data centres as critical national infrastructure, and in January 2025 announced five AI Growth Zones with £28.2 billion of planned investment and 15,000 expected jobs. So what does this mean in practice and what impact will it have on our commitment to net zero? What are the best and worst case scenarios? As this is a subject I am not that familiar with, I asked Claude (AI). Once I had worked out exactly the question to ask, it provided a very useful basis for this article.

Best & Worst Case Scenarios (to 2035)

Best Case — Clean & Controlled Growth

Projected emissions by 2035: ~34 Million tons CO2 (UK Government revised estimate)

Government source (corrected April 2026):
gov.uk/government/publications/uk-compute-roadmap/compute-evidence-annex-changes-corrected-23-april-2026

The best case sees a clean power grid in place by 2030 as planned, with data centres powered almost entirely by renewables or nuclear small modular reactors. All new data centres would have mandatory environmental impact assessments with reduced e waste and water consumption. Power efficiency standards would be tightened and enforced which would support energy cost stabilisation for consumers. The UK would be a global AI hub with

£28 billion investment fully realised. Importantly we would achieve strategic independence and no longer be reliant on foreign infrastructure.

Worst Case — Gas-Powered, Unregulated Expansion

Projected emissions 2025 to 2035: up to ~123 Million tons CO2 (DSIT upper estimate); up to 70 Million tons CO2 Carbon Brief high-expansion scenario)

Government source (corrected April 2026):
gov.uk/government/publications/uk-compute-roadmap/compute-evidence-annex-changes-corrected-23-april-2026

Carbon Brief analysis (March 2026):
carbonbrief.org/analysis-co2-from-uk-data-centres-could-be-hundreds-of-times-higher-than-thought/

The worst case sees 20 GW of capacity built with a significant share still powered by gas. This is the emissions equivalent to Sweden's p.a. total. The grid would be overwhelmed, with consumers facing substantially higher energy bills.

Planning would continue with inadequate environmental checks and Big Tech could make huge profits while local communities face the environmental and financial costs. Water supply would be strained particularly in the south east. Finally, the UK statutory carbon budget would be breached.

We all need to pay attention

The UK government has set a target of building at least 6 GW of new data centre capacity by 2030 — trebling current capacity. This would require enough power to supply a city six times the size of Birmingham. However, the government has not yet explained how this is compatible with its clean energy and climate targets, or its goal for the UK electricity grid to be supplied entirely by clean energy by 2030.

How we manage this unstoppable development is going to be critical and needs effective investment, management and regulation by the government. It requires continued focus on the speed of the UK renewable energy rollout and massive investment in grid capacity to meet surging demand without relying on gas. Environmental impact assessments must be mandatory for future data centres and voluntary sustainability targets have to be replaced by binding regulation. Ensuring data centres are properly included in the UK's statutory carbon budgets will enable progress or lack of progress to be clear to anyone interested.

In many ways this feels like it is too big to influence but much of what is required for this expansion to be successful is in the hands of our government and other institutions. As citizens we need to pay attention to the decisions being made, alert to the dangers of this transition causing catastrophic environmental harm and ready to vote, lobby and demonstrate to get the best possible result.

Pauline Element

ONE SMALL THING

Urgent advice from the RSPB following the Big Garden Birdwatch

Research has shown a worrying decline in some of our garden birds due to a disease called trichomonosis. This is a highly contagious disease and can spread where birds gather in large numbers such as at bird feeders. If you have not seen the advice on how to safely feed the birds please check the RSPB advice here.

https://www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/how-to-help-garden-birds

Pauline Element

YOUR FEEDBACK

We welcome feedback and responses to HCA newsletters. We aim to exemplify the humanist commitment to rational discussion and debate. You can contact us at climateaction@humanists.uk . All newsletters to date can be found on the Humanist Climate Action section of the Humanists UK website. This may be useful if you want to forward to other people a link to the newsletter. We aim to produce a newsletter every two months.

As always, all signed contributions to the newsletter represent simply the views of the individual writers and are not necessarily endorsed by either Humanist Climate Action or Humanists UK.