



LGIU

**Browne
Jacobson**

Net Zero and Local Democracy: building and maintaining public support

A report by the Local Government
Information Unit (LGIU)

Local Democracy Research Centre

“There is a perception that the council can get [the city] to net zero: we can't. Or that we have all the answers: we don't. We need people to work with us.”

About this report

Author: Dr Andrew Walker, LGIU

About the LGIU

The LGIU - Local Government Information Unit - is a not-for-profit, non-partisan membership organisation. We are for local government and anyone with an interest in local democracy and finding local solutions to the challenges that we all face. Our resources, innovative research and connections are relied on by colleagues across the globe.

About the Local Democracy Research Centre

The Local Democracy Research Centre was set up by the LGIU to carry out practical research on some of the key challenges for local democracy around the World.

We have a broad, international programme that engages universities and local authorities to develop new ideas and approaches for governance, municipalism and citizen participation.

About Browne Jacobson

Browne Jacobson is a leading UK and Ireland law firm working in partnership with its clients. The firm provides pragmatic advice and creative solutions-driven support, enabling clients to focus on what matters to them. Leveraging its national and international reach, its lawyers advise a diverse client base including:

- Corporates – from entrepreneurs and SMEs to large UK and international companies
- Insurers and financial services businesses
- NHS, NHS trusts and independent healthcare businesses
- Education organisations
- Central and local government and other public bodies

The firm supports, influences, and impacts positive change

across business and society by connecting and improving outcomes for every person, community, and business it serves. Its focus on well-being and individuality alongside its commitment to social mobility, diversity and inclusion ensures all its people can thrive.

Contents

Foreword	4
Introduction	5
The democratic challenge	6
Nine principles for action	7
Background	8
Democratic leadership	10
The local government view	12
Challenges facing local authorities	14
Conclusion	17
Case studies	18





Foreword

Ben Standing, Partner, Browne Jacobson

As a lawyer who works with a large local authority client base on key environmental and planning law matters, and as a member of a team responsible for reducing the emissions produced by the firm I work at – Browne Jacobson, it is clear from both roles that there are difficult choices that need to be made if we are to reach our national net zero commitments. Environmental issues have been growing in importance, especially over the last 10 years. Despite this, measures put in by my clients have often proved controversial, such as the introduction of low traffic neighbourhoods and the grant of planning permission for solar power installations.

Whilst it is not possible to make decisions which everyone supports (and there is no requirement in public law to do so), in my experience of environmental initiatives, the risk of successful challenge is greater if local residents feel they haven't been listened to. Indeed, most people when asked, will state that they care about the environment and want to combat climate change, however the answers become more nuanced when environmental measures impact upon them. This is especially true when household budgets are being squeezed through rising energy costs.

Accordingly, I am delighted that Browne Jacobson has supported this LGIU report on building democratic support for local climate action, to investigate the importance of democracy in bringing forward net zero measures.

Whilst the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015 was a landmark moment, as acknowledged at the time, it was only the start of a long and challenging process. Since then, there have been many positives, including the adoption of a legally binding target to reach net zero by 2050 and considerable analysis and policies running up to and in the wake of the UK hosted COP 26.

The UK has been making good progress towards its net zero targets, but this has mostly been possible through the phasing out of coal from power generation. Going forward the net Zero Strategy identifies that major changes are going to be made from domestic transport and heat and buildings within the next 10 years. Both these are areas that for local authority powers, especially in relation to planning and highways, are going to become highly pertinent. For example, we need to decide how we want to travel round our urban areas and how we should heat our homes. There is no one solution to these problems. The only constant is that it is likely to involve change, and change is often difficult.

An interesting recent example is the by-election in Uxbridge, where the Labour leader Sir Kier Starmer

blamed the expansion of the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) on Labour's narrow loss. This has led to politicians openly support car use and potentially influenced the London Mayor in his decision to shelve plans for a no emission zone in London. Whether opposition to ULEZ is a wide-spread issue, or whether a vocal few gave it national reach, is unclear. However, what is clear is that the political relevance of environmental decisions means that extra scrutiny is going to be placed on the decision-making process. The democratic process of listening to residents and being open and transparent are likely to be important in defending decisions.

Therefore, there is an important role for local democracy to allow the changes needed at a local level, which will ultimately allow us to achieve our national goals. This report is based on interviews with officers and councillors in various local authorities throughout the country and develops nine principles for local democratic leadership to reduce emissions.

I highly commend it to all those involved in local government.

**Ben Standing, Partner,
Browne Jacobson**

Ben specialises in environmental and planning law, supporting a large local authority client base. He is also sits in Browne Jacobson's green team which is responsible for reducing the emissions of UK & Ireland law firm.

Introduction

Local democracy is not just “nice to have” when it comes to achieving net zero. Rather, it is a necessary component of achieving our lower emissions targets in local places and across the country.

Councils are at the frontline of democratic engagement and working with the public to drive changes in our behaviour, our work, our buildings, and the communities we live in. Local democracy is vital for achieving our net zero emissions targets because:

- Councils have control or influence over important policy areas like housing, transport, health and wellbeing, which can make significant contributions in terms of reduced emissions.
- Councils can align action with the needs and preferences of local communities, ensuring buy-in and support.
- Through discussion and consultation with residents councils can tailor decisions to local contexts, but also generate shared knowledge and understanding about the problem and its solutions.
- Councils can build partnerships with residents, businesses, the third sector and other parts of government to enable and encourage behaviour change. This might lead to changes in how people use energy, transport, housing, waste services, and much more besides.

However, councils still face challenges in maintaining public support. Amidst the cost of living

crisis, inflation, fuel and energy costs that households are burdened with, not to mention other pressures and worries that occupy our minds, we find that there is a real risk of deprioritising net zero. This at a time when the need for action is ever more apparent, as the latest report from the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) reiterates.

Public support has been severely tested in recent, high profile disagreements surrounding the expansion of the Ultra Low Emissions Zone (ULEZ), which non-compliant vehicles are charged for entering. London mayor Sadiq Khan has faced criticism for the impact the cost will have on commuters and particularly on those with lower pay but reliant on cars for work and family commitments. Yet discourse around this policy quickly deteriorated due to widespread falsehoods and misinformation, coupled with unpleasant demonising of Khan himself. Open and productive debate about options for achieving net zero targets has been stymied, the dial has shifted back and progress eroded.

There is, however, increasing recognition and acknowledgement of the scale of the climate crisis we are facing. We tend to discuss this crisis on a grand scale, in global or national terms. True, the scale and significance of the change is enormous, affecting whole populations and ecosystems. Yet, even so, it is experienced differently in local places and on a very human scale. While the climate emergency is a global crisis, it needs to be

tackled at multiple levels. It requires coordination internationally and nationally, with funding, governance and partnerships directed in the right places.

But the changes that we need to see in our daily lives must be local, radical and replicated many times over. Local action is, therefore, an essential component of climate action and local government an essential agent in its leadership. Councils have influence over significant sources of emissions, established local networks, detailed knowledge of their communities, and democratic accountability.

Westminster government has committed to achieving net zero emissions by 2050 and we have taken great strides towards this. But the hard work is still ahead of us. As the cost of living crisis continues to bite and energy prices remain high, the political consensus around net-zero begins to look more fragile.

More than 300 councils in the UK [have declared climate emergencies](#), but the pace and scale of changes required can seem daunting, particularly for councils operating alone. Many local authorities have shown vision, ambition and innovation in delivering climate action. These achievements have illustrated that councils are essential for leading on decarbonisation.

The democratic challenge

Public participation and engagement are not just a supplement to decisions around climate action, they are necessary for its success. So, local government finds itself asking not only what practical steps it needs to take to advance the net-zero agenda but also how it can continue to build democratic consent around that agenda.

There are many approaches to this. Indeed, local government itself provides a vital institutional grounding for democracy in local areas, through elected local decision-makers who represent and serve communities, as well as a point of accountability and a structure for decision-making

process to operate. Many local authorities, as well as countries, have sought to supplement and augment representative government with deliberative or participative forums. But there are challenges associated with these democratic innovations, particularly around maintaining a strong link between participation and representation, which is important and often contested.

In this research, carried out in partnership with Browne Jacobson, we investigate how councils approach this challenge in the context of the changes and trade-offs required to achieve net-zero targets. We highlight the aspirations and barriers, as well as the skills and capacities required to build and maintain public support for net zero.

The challenge is particularly acute during the current crisis in the cost of living and we were interested to find out how councils have maintained public support for net zero action when other priorities have risen up the agenda.

This is a grand challenge of technical knowledge, understanding, skills and finance. But it is ultimately a democratic challenge.

This report is based on a series of interviews that the Local Democracy Research Centre carried out with senior officers and cabinet members in local authorities across England and Scotland. The interviews took place online between December 2022 and January 2023 and cover urban as well as rural areas.



Nine principles for action

Our net zero ambitions require us to make changes in places all across the country. Local government can deliver the granular change in households, neighbourhoods and communities, but, crucially, enable the change we need to see at scale to achieve national goals.

Based on the interviews for this paper, we have developed the following principles for local democratic leadership to reduce emissions.

- 1.** Net zero leadership should be place-based and local. It should contribute to the sense of connection and the stake that people feel they have in their area, and take account of the interests and behaviours of local communities.
- 2.** Net zero should be embedded across the whole of the council, not the responsibility of one department or budget line. The democratic approach should also be adopted in this way, to allow local politicians the space and mandate to brave and bold.
- 3.** Councils should take an enabling approach to provide the connections and spaces for action within the community, business, charity sector and the council. They should identify active champions within neighbourhoods and communities. They can act as a trusted source of information and encourage participation and behaviour change in a way that the council itself might not be able to.
- 4.** Messaging and communication is vital. It should be clear, simple and repeated consistently. Local authorities should clearly articulate to residents the potential for addressing cost of living and other challenges as a co-benefit of addressing the climate crisis.
- 5.** Effective approaches are stable, long-term, large in scale and combine a range of policy levers.
- 6.** Local and national priorities need to be aligned. This helps to ensure that funding can be directed where it can have the greatest impact, but also to enable the right partnerships and incentives.
- 7.** Building resilient places, including communities and economies, alongside reducing emissions is important.
- 8.** Be clear about democratic engagement: what is the process for? Is it to educate and raise awareness? To develop policies or a strategic vision? Is it to ensure buy-in from local residents?
- 9.** Engage at the right scale, whether regionally, across a locally authority area, within small neighbourhoods and on specific policy areas or decisions.

Background

2022 was set to be a year of delivery. However, progress has been slow, partly because the emerging cost of living crisis has drawn attention away from long term challenges.

In fact, with a renewed urgency in securing energy supplies as well as the need to reduce costs for consumers, there has never been a better time to drive forward the net zero agenda, with communities at its heart.

Despite this, progress on delivering the net zero strategy has been patchy, in part because of the spiralling cost of living crisis diverting attention from long-standing and long-term issues like the climate. The current set of crises follows the Covid-19 pandemic, which had already put enormous stress on public finances. Economic recovery from the pandemic resulted in an [immediate increase in emissions](#). Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, energy prices have risen and access to supply has dwindled. The Nord Stream 1 pipeline was cut off by Russia in September 2022, which put almost 40% of Europe's gas supply at risk, driving energy security up the policy agenda.

In this context, there was additional pressure on the drive towards a green economy, as this would require investment and there are potential costs to governments and consumers already struggling to make ends meet. But the argument for changing radically the organisation of economies towards low emissions and protecting biodiversity is more vital now than ever, and there are many who see

rich opportunities for growth.

This narrative is in evidence [at the international level](#). U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has said that instead of countries “hitting the brakes” on the decarbonization of the global economy in the wake of Russia's invasion, “now is the time to put the pedal to the metal towards a renewable energy future.” Meanwhile [Hans Bruyninckx](#), Executive Director of the European Environment Agency said of decoupling from fossil fuels that “I believe that a planned and fair social transition, implemented over the long term, is the only way to achieve a resilient society with a strong and sustainable economy”.

But this also needs to be articulated among local leaders, as they will provide the essential building blocks in a fair transition towards a green economy. A great deal of emissions are within the sphere of local government's activity, including house building and transport. We need to take huge steps to tackle the climate crisis. Locally this will mean mobilising resources and institutional capacity around a clear set of goals.

Articulating the economic potential of climate action will be crucial. [CDP finds that](#) city governments are more successful when they cite the co-benefits of climate action, and were able to implement more than twice as many interventions as those that did not cite these co-benefits. Key benefits that city governments reported were a shift towards more sustainable behaviour (39%) and improved resource efficiency.

Partner of choice?

Local government in the UK is the “partner of choice” for action on net zero and for the government to achieve its aims and ambitions. [The Independent Review of Net Zero](#), led by Chris Skidmore MP, argues that

“there must be more place-based, locally led action on net zero. Our local areas and communities want to act on net zero, but too often government gets in the way. The Government must provide central leadership on net zero, but it must also empower people and places to deliver. Place-based action on net zero will not only lead to more local support but will deliver better economic outcomes as well.”

Key recommendations made in the review include: “Simplifying the local net zero funding landscape to make it more efficient and productive for both central and local government....including consolidation of different pots and a reduction in competitive bidding” as well as “Providing full backing to a set of ‘trailblazer’ places that want to go further and faster on net zero, with the aim of reaching net zero by 2030”.

While the Levelling Up White Paper, published by the UK government in 2022, promised shifting powers to local government to help to boost regional growth, the Net-Zero Strategy acknowledged the essential role that devolved and local governments play in achieving net-zero. However, this has not been matched by action and support for local authorities in terms of powers and resources.



Indeed, the UK Government's current approach to net zero can make local delivery less efficient. While local leaders know their areas better and are better placed to engage with their communities around net zero, their role needs to be more clearly articulated, with long-term funding and increased capacity to support it. The funding system for local government is currently too disjointed and short termist. As the LGIU's Local Democracy Research Centre showed in its recent [2023 State of Local Government Finance report](#), councils are stretching every sinew and pulling every lever just to make ends meet. We showed that almost all councils are variously cutting back services, raising council tax and dipping into reserves year on year. It is not a sustainable system and it jeopardises our ability to coordinate net zero as a local priority.

The National Planning Framework has not been revised to facilitate the drive towards net zero. Despite the potential importance of planning, the current Framework contains little detail on how the system might help to achieve net zero ambitions. Amendments were made in July 2021 but they did not help to align

policy with the government's 2050 target, or even to reduce emissions by 78 per cent by 2035. Indeed, the chapter on climate change is very similar to the first version, which was published in 2012.

The Westminster government's latest consultation on the NPPF states that

"We committed in the government's Net Zero Strategy, published in October 2021, to review the National Planning Policy Framework to make sure it contributes to climate change mitigation and adaptation as fully as possible. In advance of next year's wider review, which will consider the issue further, we are exploring how to do more through planning to measure and reduce emissions in the built environment."

It goes on to acknowledge that:

"The planning system should, as a whole, reflect the government's ambition to help business and communities protect and enhance the environment for future generations, build a net zero carbon future, and adapt to the impacts of climate change. National planning policies and guidance, spatial development strategies and local

plans should all contribute to this core objective of planning."

Producing a local plan is an important local government responsibility that can have a significant impact on emissions, but can also serve as a focal point for engaging with residents. Some councils have adopted goals like developing '20-minute neighbourhoods', in which places are designed to enable residents to access all of their daily needs by walking or cycling. As outlined in this [LGIU briefing](#), for members only, the 20 minute neighbourhood approach can be an excellent way of engaging different communities, such as young people, in the design and delivery of place-shaping.

A full review of the NPPF in light of the government's net zero targets will follow the Royal Assent of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill.

A locally-led approach is better suited to maximising the opportunities building on the strengths in particular areas. It is also more appropriate for addressing specific challenges as they play out in these places.

Democratic leadership

Councils face a huge challenge in implementing and maintaining commitment to long-term policy goals. This is a challenge for electoral politics more generally. Some critics have argued that experts should take the lead on decision making in the face of a crisis of this immediacy, scale and complexity. Democracy, some argue, is not well suited to dealing with challenges that require such trade-offs and compromises, planning for the long-term or collective thinking about complex problems. These are symptoms of what Graham Smith calls “democratic myopia”.¹

Within the day-to-day practice of politics there are multiple practical and procedural barriers that frustrate our responses to large scale, complex challenges like climate change. Not to mention the psychological challenge of coming to terms with the scale of the crisis and the action needed.²

Rather, democracy is essential for achieving net zero because it will enable shared understanding and build public support for change. The legitimacy and consent borne of a

democratic approach to net zero will be vital for carrying it through and ensuring a just transition to a net zero economy. Command and control is widely considered to be less effective than democratic approaches to policy making at addressing socio-political challenges that arise within complex situations.³

There are a range of potential benefits from taking a democratic approach to net zero in local areas.⁴ It should improve decision making and planning by incorporating a broader range of views and perspectives. But it should also add legitimacy to the process, helping to build trust within the community and ensure that local people are supportive. This is essential for changing behaviours and implementing local strategies. By working with the community and fostering support councils can also maximise the co-benefits of net zero, ensuring that the transition is just and fair.⁵

Public participation in local areas has been positively associated with improved outcomes in both adaptation and mitigation.⁶ Indeed,

given the scale of the transformation required to tackle the crisis, public support could be seen as a necessary condition for success, particularly if we aim to build resilient communities in the process.

Participation can take different forms and operate at different levels. These can range from a government broadcasting information and listening to citizens’ responses at one end of the scale, while co-producing and implementing strategic decisions is at the other end of scale. Building a shared understanding of the problem and its solutions is an important aspect of democratic participation, as is the potential for each party to change their views in light of the dialogue.

In a study in 2022 DG Cities and the Local Government Association found that working at the scale of a neighbourhood helps to overcome challenges of knowledge, capacity and expertise. Tailored engagement with the community and well timed communications have been highlighted as successful strategies for local decarbonisation, as well as providing simple and tangible ways

1 Smith, G. (2021) *Can Democracy Safeguard the Future?* Cambridge: Polity Press

2 https://green-alliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Building_a_political_mandate_for_climate_action.pdf

3 <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Cities/Assets/Documents/EGI-Publications/PB02-EN.pdf> ; <https://sharedfuturecic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Shared-Future-PCAN-Climate-Assemblies-and-Juries-web.pdf>

4 Howarth et al. (2020)

5 Howarth, C., Bryant, P., Corner, A. et al. Building a Social Mandate for Climate Action: Lessons from COVID-19. *Environ Resource Econ* 76, 1107–1115 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10640-020-00446-9>

6 Does public participation lead to more ambitious and transformative local climate change planning?§ Massimo Cattino1 and Diana Reckien, *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 2021, 52:100–110

for people to involve themselves in the transition.⁷ The authors found this to be more effective than a centralised approach. It also helps to realise the social benefits of climate transition, such as reducing fuel poverty. Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council was highlighted for its innovative gathering and presenting of data showing the thermal efficiency of individual houses so that local residents could see the impact of retrofitting. This was combined with assessments of self-reported wellbeing to build

a clearer picture of the benefits of zero-carbon transition.

Citizen juries and assemblies are one tool out of several, which can help to create the social mandate to move forward on socially-inclusive climate action. By co-producing and including citizen's input into designing solutions they help increase public trust and ensure publics are on board and more receptive to any conditions (behavioural or other) that are implemented (Warren and Gastil 2015).

Officers and councillors we interviewed for this research agreed with this principle and stressed the importance of working in partnership with local stakeholders, residents, business, public and third sector, across local places in order to deliver net zero strategies. Public support and engagement is important because it helps to implement changes in behaviour and lowers the risk of resistance to new spending and infrastructure.

⁷ <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/neighbourhood-approach-decarbonisation#executive-summary>

Building a shared understanding of the problem and its solutions is an important aspect of democratic participation, as is the potential for each party to change their views in light of the dialogue.



The local government view

Democratic participation and net zero

Partnership and cooperation are seen as vital to the people we interviewed. There is an understanding among officers and councillors that the council can not achieve these targets alone. It requires the support of residents, businesses and the public sector across the geographical area to contribute towards net zero goals. A senior officer in a city council told us:

"We are responsible for 1% of emissions and the rest of the city is responsible for 99% and we need the city to work together towards that goal. There is a perception that the council can get to net zero: we can't. Or that we have all the answers: we don't. We need people to work with us." (Interview 1)

Another said *"There are a lot of things where we only have influence. Around 2% of things are in our direct control, but we influence about 30% of emissions."* (Interview 4). An officer in a midlands city told us that *"we needed it to be a city-wide agenda, this can only be solved by a huge multiple effort across the city."* (Interview 2)

A city council officer acknowledged that *"Engagement is integral to action, but it can't be a talking shop"* they said *"we wanted to focus on action and not be tied down with endless talking"*. This was a different approach to the county council, which has pursued a much broader consultation process throughout developing their net zero strategy:

"The [county] team have focussed on consultation and been tied down for two years, and they are largely tied up in a governance question, rather than action. We can go about it slightly differently." (Interview 1)

But the picture is different in some areas. An officer in a Scottish island authority told us that building consent for net zero *"doesn't seem to be a big challenge for us so far"*, partly because there is cross party cooperation for the measures, but perhaps more importantly because *"people can see that by tackling the climate crisis we can also make things better for people who live on the Isles."* (Interview 5) They emphasised that the focus must be on action and we were told that some residents do not universally want to engage in ongoing consultation. The officer said:

"We did have comments on the survey that said 'stop surveying us and actually do something', so I think there is a perception sometimes that we are just talking and not doing anything, but consultation is a very important part of this process." (Interview 5).

Changing priorities?

We asked interviewees whether they felt that climate change and net-zero has become less of a priority issue for people since the cost of living crisis, rise in energy prices and other recent events.

Most told us that they had seen a shift in priorities following the Covid-19 pandemic and as a result of the cost of living crisis. An officer from a city council told us:

"Yes. I don't know if it's a challenge. It sort of is but it's also a carrot. We recently put out a public survey framed by energy and cost of living and we have had a huge response. That is a good measure of how people are focussed. People are aware and focussed not on the wider agenda, but on the immediate issues of energy, heating and their homes. I'm not sure people put the links together as to where this is coming from." (Interview 1)

We were told that *"the cost of living crisis has had an impact on people's motivation. People are worried about bills but at a political level we are seeing plenty of support"*. (Interview 4). An officer in Scotland said fuel poverty is a big issue for people:

"That's the main thing people are worried about I would say. It's one of these things because the advice you give people on heating their homes is also going to have an impact on climate change, but that isn't necessarily people's main focus, it's about how do I keep my house, my family, the people I care about warm." (Interview 5)

Another told us that, amidst the other pressures people face, worrying about climate change can sometimes be seen as a "luxury":

"And it's hard to get that message across when people are so concerned about personal finance, when people are worried about interest rates rising on the mortgage, insecure tenancy, and, you know, if you've got children at school, and you hear that school budgets are getting cut, you know, that's something that concerns you more, and I totally understand that. And so I just think some people

see you worrying about climate change as a luxury, as something you do, after you've got what they think are the basics, sorted – education, health care, mortgages – whereas maybe the activists feel that the climate underpins all of that, our entire civilisation is underpinned by the environment.” (Interview 7)

However, addressing the pressures around the cost of living can also align with the equitable approach to net zero transition that is favoured in some councils. A district council officer said that there *“has to be social justice, essentially. It is sustainable development and in a cost of living crisis it actually fits together quite well.”* (Interview 3)

The district council officer told us their communications with residents has shifted to take new priorities and pressures into account. They

generally are pushing *“climate positive messaging, but it's actually much more about the cost of living and a money saving message now.”* (Interview 3). The city council officer in Scotland raised the problem of changing individuals' behaviour around transport when a significant number of people live in the county area, which is *“very spread out, without transport networks. Public transport is very very expensive. So getting people to take public transport when it costs three or four times as much for the same journey is a big problem”*. (Interview 4)

A Scottish council officer said: *“Right now I think there are a lot of competing priorities, I think a lot of the funding, a lot of the projects are voted on by local politicians, and when they're talking to constituents, right now, climate change is not top of the agenda, even with Cop27.”*

They told us that this was apparent among officers too, and throughout the council. Where there are concerns about poorly insulated buildings, for example, this is more about costs and providing support for vulnerable communities through the winter. (Interview 7)

Another Scottish council officer acknowledged that the cost of living has taken up a lot more attention in recent months. They stressed that:

“I think if you are communicating about cost of living and climate you need data but you also need relatable stories that underpin it...so it's trying to show people and communicate that it really connects with everything, it's not an isolated issue. I think for me the key is to get people to see those connections.” (Interview 8).

“...there are a lot of things where we only have influence. Around two per cent of things are in our direct control, but we influence about thirty percent of emissions.”



Challenges facing local authorities

Restrictions on powers and restrictions on capacity and resources represent significant challenges for local authorities in driving democratic leadership on net-zero goals in their areas.

Power

One of the most immediate challenges for local authorities with net zero ambitions is that they have limited powers. It is important, therefore, that they work in partnership with residents, businesses, and other organisations within their places. They must use their influence and leadership to enable investment and changes to behaviour. One officer told us *“everything now is outside our direct control. The announcement of a climate emergency is a statement of intent”* (Interview 8).

Councils can exercise power and influence through housing, planning, transport and procurement of services. But they also have an important leadership role as convenors, bringing together partners and residents across the local area to try and stimulate or enable action.

One interviewee acknowledged that, while they have ambitions to lead on net zero across the whole council area, they can only influence and persuade where a great deal of emissions are concerned. A city council officer agreed, telling us that this raises a challenge in terms of public perception of the council’s role: *“There is a perception that the council can get [the city] to net zero:*

we can’t. Or that we have all the answers: we don’t. We need people to work with us.” (Interview 1)

The district council officer explained their council’s strategy for exercising influence across the local area. The council follows “the three ‘Es’”. They see themselves as an exemplar, an enabler, and an encourager of change. Of these three, the role as an encourager, using nudges, discussion and engagement, is seen as the most important area, they said, *“because of all the others we need to help us get to net zero.”* (Interview 3).

Capacity, skills and funding

Councils need to dedicate a great deal of their resources to coordinating various and disparate funding streams. These predominantly come to them from separate Whitehall departments, but are often routed through other sub-national and local bodies like Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and targeted across geographies like the Local Growth Fund and the Shared Prosperity Fund that aim to address productivity and inequalities in local places. Funding is often subject to competitive bidding processes that reward good application writing, rather than need or capacity. They also drive competition across the sector.

One senior officer told us that *“we haven’t got a dedicated budget or a climate war chest”*. (Interview 2). Another officer from the South West told us that:

“We do have a considerable budget compared to other councils, but I said ‘no’ to more money because I don’t want this work to be put in a box. It has to be integrated across the council. It is a key part of the whole council’s plan.” (Interview 3).

Rather than a climate change team holding all the responsibility for action, net zero is embedded across the council: *“it is a part of the council’s plan, so there are heads of service named against things and they have to report on them”*. (Interview 3).

Another officer agreed, saying: *“Funding is always going to be an issue, getting the right resources, the right people in the right place at the right time, working towards ensuring that everyone understands that they have a role to play when it comes to tackling climate change.”* (Interview 5)

Retrofit

The funding challenge is particularly acute in the case of retrofitting homes, which produce a large percentage of current emissions. The Scottish city officer told us: *“We can update our housing stock but we need residents to retrofit private homes... and a lot is listed. It is expensive for individuals to update their homes at a time when everything is expensive.”* (Interview 4)

Housing is responsible for about one-fifth of all emissions, most homes that are around today will be standing in 30 years’ time. Schemes to decarbonise existing housing

are therefore just as important, if not more critical, as the energy efficiency of new properties.

[In evidence to an enquiry by the House of Commons environmental audit committee](#) earlier this year, the Climate Change Committee said, 43% of UK social housing has an energy performance certificate (EPC) rating of D or E, with a further one per cent at F or below.

[In England, £160m is available through the social housing decarbonisation fund](#). The Scottish government is offering £200m over five years via the [social housing net zero heat fund](#). The Welsh government, meanwhile, has expanded its [optimised retrofit programme](#) by a further £150m, from an initial £19.5m.

Some grants depend on councils or housing associations demonstrating innovation or innovative schemes that are needed to improve the energy efficiency of some flats or houses. At the same time, social landlords must show that using greener energy will not lead to higher fuel bills.

The city council cabinet member echoed the need for investment and capacity building around retrofitting: *“Existing buildings is a big one. We need the finance and the skills to improve the buildings we have.”* (Interview 6)

Misinformation

Countering narratives around issues like low-traffic neighbourhoods or approaches for place-shaping like the 15 Minute Neighbourhood model, has proved to be a challenge for local authorities.

Alongside disengagement and disenchantment among local populations, framing behavioural changes in an appealing way, making them popular and improving take-up is important. There is a danger that people see changes as limiting their freedom or living standards. When combined with the pervasiveness of some narratives on social media this can be quite damaging to progress on net zero. Councils need to think seriously about their communications, online and offline.

Deliberative models of democratic engagement can help to counter misinformation, as well as developing shared understanding and encouraging support for new measures. They are also expensive and time consuming, though, and may not provide the simple solutions that some might hope to achieve.

Democratic deliberation

We asked our interviewees their views on different deliberative models of engagement around issues like net zero and how they have approached this in their area.

Among the approaches for boosting participation in decision making processes, citizens’ assemblies and other forms of “mini-publics” like citizens’ juries, have received a lot of attention. Deliberation, through processes such as a citizens’ assembly or juries, can create greater public support, political mandate and momentum for change amongst the wider public.

As well as the citizens’ assembly

model, councils can explore alternative deliberative tools. Focus groups have been highlighted as being just as, if not more, effective ways of gauging public opinion on specific issues. They can produce useful insights and require less investment and time.

Meanwhile, the educative aspect of citizens’ assemblies can be limited to a smaller group within the community when compared to broadcast forms of communication, like social media, radio, or partnering with big local employers. One recent study of a citizens’ assembly process highlighted that:

“it was a lot of money to talk to 25 people even though they come away as really good advocates, unless they’re advocates that go out and talk to 1,000 people or you know, from a value for money perspective you know it’s not the best value for money.”

Several officers we interviewed raised the challenge of limited capacity and resources for doing democratic engagement properly. One, in a rural area, said:

“And sometimes you sit at the town hall for 10 hours, maybe five people come in, but that’s 20% of the population of the village. And so, it’s incredibly time consuming, you have to travel long distances, but face-to-face now that the pandemic is at a stage where we can do face-to-face, I think that’s something that’s still really valuable to people, because a lot of these communities wouldn’t bother with an online consultation.” (Interview 7)

They also told us that the councils need to deploy the right skills, resources and infrastructure to

do participation in a positive and productive way, emphasising that *“Community Engagement Officer is a professional expert role”*. Furthermore, knowing which structures and processes to use at which time is seen as an important factor in successful implementation.

Assemblies and juries can be more participative or consultative depending on the process and framework that is used, while participants tend to be insulated from any direct responsibility or accountability for outcomes.

Views of deliberative fora among our interviewees were mixed and some emphasised that their purpose should be clearly understood. The district council officer described their adoption of mini publics for encouraging participation around the net zero strategy. They came to a point where the citizens assembly was no longer an effective institutional vehicle for moving the plan forward. They told us: *“Citizens assemblies are of limited use. They are for designing the strategy, rather than delivering it.”* (Interview 3).

Another officer in a Scottish city council agreed, telling us they are *“fitting governance around action. Before we had the right people for writing plans, and now we need the right people for action”*. (Interview 4) The council has a Leadership Board, which *“is actually more of a Delivery*

Unit” including ‘theme leads’, heads of service who identify projects and carry them through.

The district officer told us they are aiming to embed the right processes across the council, so that net zero is a thread that runs through each service. They said *“we need to formalise the decision making process so we make climate positive decisions across the council.”* (Interview 3)

Working with groups who are already engaged is more straightforward, the challenge is in reaching out to those who are not already engaged. The same officer told us their council’s Community Engagement Board is bringing in influencers from other groups in the community, such as farmers and faith groups: *“These are people who are not already in the ‘climate conversation’ but they are engaged in lots of networks that we need to tap into”*. The officer told us: *“We provide a facilitator to work with them, and to ensure they are representative of their groups, not just providing their own personal view.”*

A question raised by one of the city officers was whether it is more effective to go for mass engagement or to take a targeted and collaborative approach, with specific stakeholders. The cabinet member in a city council said: *“It is important to engage just a few of the*

right people, and [find] spokespeople in different communities.” (Interview 6). This was reiterated by another officer, who argued that one solution to affect behaviour change in the community, rather than engaging with everyone, is to identify people who are:

“well known and well respected in that area. If you get those people on board and they support what you’re doing, they’ll start spreading out from there and will be word of mouth that’ll spread much faster, compared to if we go in and say you should be doing x, y and z. If it’s coming from within the community it will carry more weight because it’s someone people already know and trust.” (Interview 5)

A cabinet member at a city council said they have identified a big challenge around engaging young people with their net zero agenda:

“We are making connections for consultation. This is a huge effort. We have gone into secondary schools, bus companies have put QR codes on the back of each seat with links to the consultation.” (Interview 6)

It is important to engage just a few of the right people, and [find] spokespeople in different communities.”

Conclusion

Democracy should neither be a distraction, nor a nice add-on to decision making, least of all around the changes involved in achieving net zero. These will require such significant shifts in our communities and economies that designing them with and around people is an essential component for success.

Yet, as the evidence in this paper has shown, that is not without its challenges.

There are costs to doing democratic engagement well. It takes time, resources and capacity, as well as knowledge and a clear understanding of what we want to achieve. There are many approaches and innovations that can be

experimented with, but we need to ensure that the right fora are set up for the right purposes. They need to have a clear relationship to the established institutions of representative democracy, which can themselves be a powerful tool for deliberation and working on behalf of citizens.

Public support for net zero and climate action has been severely tested in recent months, and will continue to be tested as we head into winter, with the cost of living, fuel and heating still at the front of many people's minds. Meanwhile, council finances themselves are stretched so thin that many are struggling to maintain their statutory responsibilities. Indeed

there have been several high-profile cases of councils issuing section 114 notices, declaring effective bankruptcy.

It is challenging, to say the least, to maintain net zero as a priority among the public. But no less essential. Indeed, it is even more essential that it be seen as a democratic challenge, too, that communities are brought into the process, that the co-benefits and trade-offs are clearly articulated within local contexts.

This is a challenge that gets to the heart of local government's role as a democratic leader of local places. In that role it can be transformative.



Case studies

Climate Connections – online communications in Plymouth

Plymouth City Council launched a website, [Climate Connections Plymouth](#), to improve the availability and accessibility of information for local people regarding net zero in the city.

In addition to sharing information, the aim is to persuade and encourage citizens to take action. The website is not “council” in style or tone – the emphasis of the approach is co-production. The team recognises that the council is responsible for a small percentage of emissions, while the rest of the city is responsible for the large majority. There is understanding, therefore, that the city needs to work together towards the net zero goal.

The messages on the website are intended to demonstrate what can be achieved through collective action and they emphasise the co-benefits of climate action, including access to healthier lifestyles and growing the economy in a way that benefits the community.

The council lays out the challenges of climate change, beginning with the causes at a global scale, before focussing on the local challenges within Plymouth itself, including its context as a city in the south west of the UK.

The actions that individuals and communities can take are presented in terms of energy use, travel, waste and so on. They were drawn from academic research, as well as the Devon Carbon Plan. Crucially they range from the smaller and simpler actions, to larger and more complex ones such as ensuring energy efficient buildings, which require partnerships and funding.

This is not a consultation exercise, or intended to feed into an assembly-style mini public. Rather, it is intended to encourage collaboration and facilitate action. It features projects and initiatives from all organisations in the city, like [Future Plymouth 2030](#), which highlights the opportunities to reduce carbon in the built environment, and a battery recycling scheme facilitated by e-cargo bikes. The website also features stories from residents, as well as experts and campaigners, to show what is being done and what is possible locally.

Citizen Assembly in Oxford

Both reaching and sustaining net zero will be impossible without good governance practices. From brave leadership and holistic decision-making, to strong cross sector collaboration and meaningful public engagement, transformational change cannot happen without effective governance that looks beyond net zero and prioritises equity and a just transition. Despite the challenges associated with local climate governance, councils across the world are developing innovative strategies to facilitate effective and inclusive climate action.

One-way communication, based just on disseminating messages, tends to be less effective at building support and maintaining changes in behaviour. Some councils look to citizens' assemblies as a model for developing dialogue with groups of local people in the community. The aims vary but can include involving citizens in the decision making process, developing strategic goals or developing shared knowledge and understanding.

In 2019 [Oxford City Council](#) became the first local authority in the UK to establish a citizens assembly to help address the issue of climate change, and consider the measures that should be taken in Oxford. Made up of a randomly selected group of Oxford's citizens, the assembly met regularly over a two-week period to discuss issues, consult independent experts, help consider new carbon targets and additional measures to reduce emissions.

The Assembly broadly supported strong climate action with a majority of members feeling that the city should aim to achieve net zero sooner than 2050 and that Oxford should be a leader in tackling the climate crisis. However, around 1 in 4 to 1 in 3 participants rejected the most ambitious visions of a future Oxford and were concerned by the burden of responsibility being placed on individuals. IPSOS Mori summarised the Assembly's findings in a [final report](#).

Among other things, the Assembly's findings led the City Council to set a Climate Emergency Budget that commits over £1m additional operational funding and £18m of capital investment to address the climate emergency.

Green participatory budgeting in Lisbon, Portugal

Lisbon adopted participatory budgeting at a municipal scale in 2008, making it the first European capital to do so. This decision allowed citizens to use parts of the Council's annual budget for community projects. In 2020 this process was made more sustainable by focusing the participatory budget exclusively on proposals for a more sustainable, resilient and environmentally-friendly city.

The Lisbon green participatory budget mobilises a hybrid model of citizen engagement which includes web-based platforms for voting and proposal submission, alongside in-person discussion and debate. The total budget for the process is €5m. You can [read more about the process here](#).

Blended financing for local decarbonisation

The Cities Commission for Climate investment (3Ci), which was set up as a partnership between the Connected Places Catapult, Core Cities UK and London Councils has developed a funding model for place-based investment in decarbonisation across the UK's cities, specifically on complex and expensive challenges like retrofitting housing in areas including the West Midlands Combined Authority.

Using income generated from profitable schemes such as renewable energy, the blended finance model developed by 3Ci channels investment towards more risky programmes like green infrastructure, retrofit and waste management decarbonisation. Local authorities have the decisive role as conveners that bring together partners and communities on a place-basis to develop investment opportunities, such as parcelling up groups of properties for retrofitting programmes that might otherwise struggle for funding.

The model pulls together investment plans across the UK's largest cities, which 3Ci estimates at £206bn, into a larger, sustainable package to encourage investors. The department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy has supported 3Ci's Net Zero Place Programme, which incorporates a series of Net Zero Neighbourhoods and promotes place-based interventions. The funding involves two four-year loans at a higher rate, from the UK Infrastructure Bank, or a similar development bank. This is followed by a longer-term, forty-year loan.

Blending government and private sector funding should provide sustainability and stability for investors, savings for the public sector and the potential capacity to scale projects up.

Offshore wind training centre, Norfolk and Suffolk – demonstrating co-benefits

As the offshore wind sector grows across, coastal towns across the UK have an opportunity to benefit. An example of this is Great Yarmouth where Scottish Power's East Anglia One Wind Farm has created 3,500 jobs in construction and 100 long-term skilled jobs in operation and maintenance. Another operations and maintenance contract with Vattenfall will create 150 jobs for 25 years and hundreds more in the supply chain.

Great Yarmouth has some of the highest proportion of deprived neighbourhoods in the country. To help ensure that local people are able to benefit from the investments in offshore wind the [East of England Offshore Wind Centre](#) opened in the town in 2018. Made possible by a £1.1m grant from the New Anglia Skills Deal Programme, provided by Norfolk County Council, Suffolk local authorities and the Education and Skills Funding Agency, the centre supports local people to reskill and gain employment in the offshore wind industry.

Examples like this one highlight potential benefits for local people in terms of access to training and new jobs in the green economy. These opportunities will likely form part of the mix in building consensus for interventions, if they can be given long-term frameworks of institutional and financial support.

LGIU

251 Pentonville Road
London, N1 9NG

info@lgiu.org | lgiu.org

© LGIU September 2023

