


Net Zero and Local Democracy: building and maintaining public support

19 September 2023  Ben Standing

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.

Read the full report [↓](#)

/BrowneJacobson/media/Media/government/Net-Zero-and-Local-Democracy-building-and-maintaining-public-support.pdf

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 local authority area, within small neighbourhoods and on specific policy areas or decisions.

Read the full report [↓](#)

/BrowneJacobson/media/Media/government/Net-Zero-and-Local-Democracy-building-and-maintaining-public-support.pdf

Key contact

Ben Standing

Partner

ben.standing@brownejacobson.com

+44 0330 045 2400

Related expertise

