Joining Up

The role of local government and citizens in climate action

Tom Sasse
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About mySociety

mySociety is a not-for-profit group, based in the UK but working with partners internationally. We build and share digital technologies that help people be active citizens, across the four practice areas of Democracy, Transparency, Community and Climate. As one of the earliest civic technology organisations to have been established, we are committed to building the Civic Technology community and undertaking rigorous research that tests our actions, assumptions and impacts. Our global research work into digital democracy, civic technology and user-centred design has positioned mySociety as a leading authority in digital civic engagement and participation.

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About the author

Tom is a researcher and writer, and completed this project in a freelance capacity. He is an associate director at the Institute for Government and leads its work on net zero and the coronavirus pandemic. He also delivers the Institute’s training programme on how government and parliament works. Before joining IfG, Tom worked at the Open Data Institute and the think tank Reform.
Summary

In the last decade, debates around climate change have focussed on the national and international stage. In 2015, countries pledged to work together to limit warming to 1.5-2 degrees. Since then, many have adopted net zero targets, and a key aim at COP26 was raising nearer-term ambition.

But there is growing recognition that while climate change is a global problem, a big part of the route to tackling it will need to be local. Net zero will require big changes in people's lives; the transition is much more likely to be successful if it reflects local concerns and priorities.

This report, commissioned by civic tech charity mySociety, explores the role of local government and citizens in climate action in the UK. It looks at how well the public understands what local authorities do, what they think about net zero, and what they see as the role of local authorities and communities in reaching it.

The report’s key messages are:

1. **Net zero is a national mission on a huge scale.** It will mean changes to our landscapes and lifestyles, our physical infrastructure and energy systems, our homes, our diets, the way we travel. As well as being necessary, it should be a positive transition resulting in cleaner, healthier, more productive communities. But it will require some big investments, which need to be paid for fairly, and changes in people's lives. Broad support will be critical.

2. **To be successful, net zero will require strong local involvement.** This is the message from a growing chorus of voices (and not just diehard devo-advocates). Central government will have to take some decisions and set direction. It overwhelmingly controls funding. But the path to net zero will be different across the UK: rural areas face very different issues to dense urban ones. Councils are well placed to understand local concerns, needs and capabilities - and build support for pathways that reflect these. They can act as conveners, working with local citizens, businesses and community groups.

3. **Local climate action is gearing up, but councils face constraints.** Councils hold key levers in housing, transport and planning; in all, they exercise powers or influence over around a third
of all UK emissions.\(^1\) Almost all have a net zero target and four fifths have published a climate action plan. But these vary in scope, detail and quality; many councils are still getting to grips with how to cut (or even measure) emissions. Some have started engaging citizens. But in general councils lack funding and capabilities, which is holding back climate action.

4. **The public supports stronger climate action.** In the last three years climate change has climbed to become the third most important issue facing the country – and this shift appears pretty robust. Current cost of living pressures present challenges, but recent polling shows the public still overwhelmingly supports the UK’s net zero target. Most people think stronger action is needed to meet it.

5. **People support local areas playing a bigger role in net zero.** Trust and satisfaction with government has been in decline, but attitudes towards local councils have held up better. In particular, people much prefer councillors when asked who should make decisions about their areas. They think local areas have a high degree of responsibility for tackling climate change, and believe central government should provide more funding to enable local action.

6. **Public understanding of local government is relatively low.** The public makes little distinction between different tiers of government. While people know councils are responsible for some highly visible services like waste collection, their understanding of the range of actions local authorities could take to tackle climate change is limited. Awareness of responsibilities around key areas such as energy efficiency is low.

7. **Local climate action will need to be framed around wider concerns.** People strongly support some net zero policies, including frequent flyer levies, carbon taxes, improved public transport, and support for replacing gas boilers. They want a “just transition”, and are concerned that costs and impacts should be shared fairly. There has been less polling on preferences for local climate action, but when asked about priorities for their community, people report issues including affordable housing, vibrant high streets, green spaces and youth employment. Successful transitions will need to be framed in terms of how they deliver such benefits for citizens - as well as reducing emissions.

Since it was set up, mySociety has developed tools that help people to become more active citizens – including technologies that enable civic participation like FixMyStreet. It commissioned this report to inform its new climate programme, which will focus on helping local areas to cut emissions.\(^2\) The

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1. Climate Change Committee, Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget
2. mySociety, Climate programme
The report concludes by reflecting on four areas where mySociety could focus efforts: education and awareness raising; tools and methods for public engagement; understanding local preferences; and monitoring and tracking progress.

The report is based on literature review, with a focus on polling and public attitudes work, as well as conversations with ten experts. It is structured as follows:

1. What does local government do, and what is its role in tackling climate change?
2. What do people know about local government?
3. What do people think about climate change?
4. What do people think about local government and climate change?
5. Conclusion and recommendations
What does local government do, and what is its role in tackling climate change?

Local councils are democratically led and accountable to local citizens. There are several different types of local authority in the UK and they have a range of responsibilities and levers when it comes to climate change. This includes mitigation (reducing emissions) and adaptation (preparing for climate impacts). Local authorities are well placed to understand the concerns of citizens, but they face constraints in terms of resources.

The patchwork of local government in the UK is complicated

The structure of local government in the UK is not easy to understand. Different waves of devolution have left a jumble of organisations – from district, county and city councils to metropolitical districts, unitary authorities, combined authorities and mayoral combined authorities. As the government’s recent Levelling Up White Paper put it: “there is a patchwork of local bodies across the UK which often overlap and are hard to navigate”\(^3\)

From the perspective of a citizen trying to get in touch with someone about a problem, or even find out who is responsible for what, the resulting system can be opaque – a point illustrated by the diagram below, which shows organisations involved in transport in Cambridge.

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\(^3\) UK Government, *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*
The main distinction to keep in mind is between:

- **Single-tier areas**, where one authority runs all local government. In England this includes the 32 London boroughs, 36 metropolitan districts and 55 unitary authorities.

- **Two-tier areas**, where functions are split. 26 English counties have county councils, which manage social care and some aspects of transport and education. These areas are then sub-divided into 192 district councils, which run neighbourhood services, environmental health, planning and housing authorities, and often own housing.

Scotland and Wales also have unitary authorities, while Northern Ireland has 11 districts, which are similar to unitary authorities but responsible for a smaller range of services, with activities including education and housing managed centrally.

Many aspects of climate policy (and target-setting) are devolved. This means local authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland often rely on policies made by the devolved administrations (DAs) - though the government at Westminster still retains an important influence, particularly over revenue-raising. Buildings and homes are a good example: the Scottish government has developed an
ambitious decarbonisation policy, but it still found itself constrained by decisions made in the UK government’s Heat and Buildings Strategy.

At the sub-local level, parish and town councils can also play an important role in community engagement. For example researchers at the University of Surrey have mapped a complex set of interactions between smaller local councils and the county council that has informed approaches taken to the climate crisis across the county.4

**Local authorities provide a range of services**

Local authorities across the UK have a range of responsibilities. These can be broadly split into three categories: service delivery (the provision of services like social care and waste collection), regulation and enforcement (for example overseeing building standards) and place making (a wider strategic and coordinating role, which includes planning and investment).5

As Figure 2 shows, smaller district authorities tend to be responsible for a more limited range of services, such as waste collection, street cleaning and community safety. Larger county councils take on more strategic areas like highways and roads and children’s services (supporting and protecting vulnerable children). Responsibility for some important areas, such as planning, is shared between different tiers.

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4 [Russel E and Christie I, The Remaking of Institutions for Local Climate Governance? Towards Understanding Climate Governance in a Multi-Level UK Local Government Area: A Micro-Local Case Study](https://example.com)

5 [mySociety, Categorising local government services for emissions reduction](https://example.com)
Figure 2 - Distribution of powers among local authorities in the UK by council type (source: Institute for Government)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential for combined authority role</th>
<th>Responsibility in two tier councils</th>
<th>Councils in Northern Ireland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts and recreation</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Births, deaths, and marriage registration</td>
<td>County</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building regulations</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burials and cremations</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coastal protection</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community safety</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concessionary travel</td>
<td>County</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer protection</td>
<td>County</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council tax and business rates</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>District -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic development</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Both -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and skills</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>District -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elections and electoral registration</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency planning</td>
<td>County</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Health</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highways and roads</td>
<td>County</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>District -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Tier</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensing</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markets and fairs</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public conveniences</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public health</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social care</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports centres and parks</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street clearing</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>District</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trading standards</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waste collection and recycling</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waste disposal</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 - Powers separated by potential for combined authority role, responsibility in two tier system, and if (reprocessing of Institute for Government chart.)

In England, the picture has been complicated further since 2014 by the introduction of ‘metro mayors’, who sit above (and tend to operate across several) local authorities. These mayors exercise strategic economic and public service functions, with additional powers handed down from central government in bespoke deals.⁶

There are now nine city regions in England with metro mayors, including in Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, and the West Midlands. The powers these different mayors have vary; the government has set out an ambition to bring more consistency to them, but differences are likely to remain.⁷ The Scottish and Welsh governments have also agreed deals with several city regions, such as Glasgow and Swansea Bay.

Local authorities in the UK rely on a mix of funding to provide services. In England they raise around half their revenue themselves, 31% through council tax and 18% through business rates. Council tax bands are set locally but within thresholds set by central government (unless councils agree to hold a referendum); business rates are determined by a multiplier, set by central government.⁸ The other half of local authority funding comes from central government in the form of a grant (in Scotland the proportion is slightly higher).

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⁶ [Institute for Government, Metro Mayors](https://www.foundationalchange.org.uk/reports/metro-mayors)
⁷ [UK Government, Levelling Up the United Kingdom](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom)
The most important trend in local government in the last decade, with implications for public attitudes and satisfaction, has been sharp cuts to grant funding from central government – particularly in England. Combined with growing demand for social care eating up an increasingly large chunk of budgets, this has put pressure on both the breadth and quality of local authority services.⁹

![Changes in resource spending on local government by UK nation (real terms)](source)

Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses, 2015 to 2019; and Office for National Statistics, Country and regional public sector finances expenditure tables, 2019. The analysis covers identifiable resource spending only. It excludes any spending on health, education, and public order and safety. Funding received from DWP for Housing Benefit is also excluded. The functions of local government in Northern Ireland are significantly more limited than in Great Britain and Northern Ireland is therefore not shown.

Figure 3 - Change in resource spending local government (Source: Institute for Government)

**Local authorities have powers and influence over roughly a third of UK emissions**

Debates about the role of UK local authorities in tackling climate change go back a long way. In 2008, as Parliament was adopting the UK’s (genuinely) word-leading Climate Change Act, the LGA established a Climate Change Commission. Ahead of its time in many ways, the commission argued that local authorities were “uniquely well placed” to provide systemic leadership on climate, as a result of their democratic mandate, knowledge, roles and responsibilities.¹⁰

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⁹ For an assessment of the impact of funding cuts on local authority service delivery, see Institute for Government, Performance Tracker.

¹⁰ LGA, A climate of change (2008) [not available online]
The promise of that vision may not have been fully realised in the subsequent decade, but the adoption of the UK’s net zero target in 2019 has led to a renewed focus on the role of local areas in tackling emissions.

The UK has already reduced its territorial emissions by 44% in the last thirty years, moving away from coal, first to gas and more recently to renewables. This was achieved largely through decisions by small number of policy makers in central government and the energy sector. But the emissions that remain - which are particularly concentrated in transport, housing, industry and agriculture - will require involvement from a much wider range of actors.

Technically, local authorities may only be “directly responsible” for 2-5% of the UK’s emissions, through their estate programmes, service operations and procurement. But the Climate Change Committee estimates they have powers or influence over roughly a third of UK emissions.

This includes through “planning and transport policy, waste services, regeneration and economic development and other service delivery; including place based emissions cuts that can be enabled through council leadership, skills and training programmes, partnerships, innovation and community involvement”.

The two largest causes of emissions by megatonne of CO2 – passenger cars and heating in homes – are both areas where local authorities are set to play a key role in supporting residents and businesses to make the transition.

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11 HM Government, Net Zero Strategy
12 Climate Change Committee, Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget
13 Climate Change Committee, Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget
14 Climate Change Committee, Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget
On top of this, they also have important responsibilities for adaptation, including flood prevention, overheating in buildings, and nature restoration.

The planning system is also a particularly important lever. Councils are constrained by national planning policies - current guidance encourages them to focus more on house building targets than environmental objectives - and by limited capacity; many have been forced to cut environmental planning roles in the last decade.  

But planning decisions remain a key tool for designing communities in a way that supports low-carbon lifestyles. It is not the case that housebuilding and emissions reduction need to be in conflict; indeed, the Centre for Cities outlined the important role density can play in reducing emissions if urban planning is done well. Rather, where and how housing gets built - its proximity to low-carbon transport and energy infrastructure, and so on - has a big impact on future behaviour and emissions.

The CCC include planning in their taxonomy of ways in which local authorities exert influence, alongside wider activities such as partnerships and community engagement.

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15 Institute for Government, Net zero: how government can meet its climate change target
16 Centre for Cities, How urban planning is key to net zero: evidence from London
17 Climate Change Committee, Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget
If you put more weight on these outer layers of influence, the proportion of emissions where local authorities have a role to play could be calculated as higher than a third. For example the UK government’s Net Zero strategy, published in October 2021, cited internal work showing some 82% of all UK emissions were “within the scope of influence of local authorities”.

This claim deserves some scepticism. The analysis and data behind it (and much else in the strategy) was not published, making it hard to know what is and isn’t being included. Central government departments are sometimes inclined to devolve responsibility without the powers and resources to back it up.

Speculating at the sums involved, a figure as high as 82% is likely to include nearly all of the transport, business, residential and agricultural emissions shown in Figure 3 - perhaps only excluding the majority of energy supply emissions (most of which come from power stations), which accounted for 21% of UK emissions in 2019.

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18 HM Government, Net Zero Strategy
19 Various bodies have argued greater transparency is needed to enable the public and external experts to scrutinise claims made in the strategy, see UK refuses to release document showing Net Zero Strategy CO2 savings
20 HM Government, 2019 UK greenhouse gas emissions: summary
The Net Zero strategy backs up the claim by pointing out that local authorities have a key role in “communicating with, and inspiring action by, local businesses, communities, and civil society”. On a basic level it is true that emissions come from consumption, and that consumption happens within the ambit of one local authority or another. But in reality, most local authorities have little real influence over many of these emissions categories, while in others the “scope” of their influence is minimal compared with that of central government.

For example, any local communications campaign encouraging people to fly less or change their diets will make minimal difference compared with decisions about taxation or levies. And even though councils may exert slightly more influence over emissions from cars and HGVs (for example, they can introduce clean air and congestion zones) - again these interventions are likely to be much less significant to overall trends than decisions about, say, fuel duty and investment in the UK road network.

It is reasonable to suggest that a large, well-resourced local authority could play an important role in cutting more than just one third of emissions - or, as will be the case in many areas, district and county councils working together. There have been calls - most notably in UK100’s Power Shift report - for councils to get more net zero powers from central government: for instance certain strategic areas could be given “London-style” powers over transport, while local authorities more generally could be given stronger powers to help with planning connections into energy systems.21

But given current constraints, many local authorities are likely to find the scope of emissions over which they have substantive influence to be closer to a third. If they prove able to increase their capacity and access greater levels of funding and finance (which we discuss more below), their scope of influence would increase.

**Most local authorities have declared climate emergencies, adopted net zero targets and published climate action plans**

Over the last five years there has been much focus at the local level on councils declaring a ‘climate emergency’. As of March 2020, 335 councils in the UK have done so.22 In some places, they have been pushed to adopt such motions by local community and activist groups, for whom the

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21 UK100, Power Shift
22 Climate Emergency/mySociety, Climate Action Plan Explorer declaration database
acknowledgement of the scale of the problem by their authorities is a core aim. The UK Parliament also declared a climate emergency a couple of months before passing the UK’s net zero target.

Such declarations can arguably be helpful as focal points for discussing the problem. But they are symbolic gestures and no replacement for concrete targets and policies to reduce emissions, which is where attention and debate in local government is now moving.

Most UK councils have now set emissions targets. They vary considerably in terms of ambition, but as Figure 6 shows, most are aiming to reach net zero well before the UK’s 2050 target. Over 100 councils (more than a quarter of those with a target) have set their target for 2030 of before, while just 12% have set theirs in line with the government’s net zero target.
Local authority net zero targets

Target for whole area, rounded up to nearest five years

- No whole area target
- 2025
- 2030
- 2035
- 2040
- 2045
- 2050

There is also considerable variation in what these targets cover, including emissions type (all greenhouse gases or just carbon dioxide) and scope (just those a council is directly responsible for or those that result more widely from its operations).

Figure 6 - Map of local authority net zero targets

Source: data.climateemergency.uk (25 March 2022); HoC LA cartogram | Open Parliament Licence
The National Audit Office found three quarters of single and upper tier authorities had commitments to work towards net zero emissions within the local authority area. But other, particularly smaller, councils have targets which focus on a narrower scope of emissions; often smaller councils start by looking only at emissions produced directly by the council itself.

Other studies have similarly found varying degrees of robustness in the way local authority targets are drafted, and the extent to which they define what is in and out of scope.

There often appears to be confusion - within communities and even within councils themselves - about what is covered. This probably stems in part from the fact that this a relatively new area: local authorities have not previously had the responsibility (or capacity) to measure local area emissions in a robust way.

### Emissions reporting and local government

Emissions are generally split into three categories:

- **Scope 1**: direct emissions from operations that are owned and controlled by a reporting organisation
- **Scope 2**: indirect energy emissions associated with the consumption of electricity, heat, steam or cooling by an organisation
- **Scope 3**: all other indirect emissions that occur, upstream and downstream, in the value chain of an organisation

In the case of a local authority:

- **Scope 1** includes emissions occurring directly on a council’s property or from its activities, for instance a boiler heating a council office, or vehicles owned by the council
- **Scope 2** includes emissions from energy consumed to support a council’s activities
- **Scope 3**, which is much wider and is estimated to represent 70-80% of a local authority’s total emissions, includes embedded emissions in things a council buys, waste disposal, all contractor emissions, and emissions related to local people’s use of local authority services.

The UK government recommends that local authorities report on their scope 1 and 2 emissions. But this remains voluntary, and the way emissions are tracked and reported across local government is still patchy.

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23 [National Audit Office, Local government and net zero in England](#)
24 [Climate Emergency UK, Council Climate Scorecards](#)
25 [Institute for Government, Net zero: how government can meet its climate change target](#)
26 [Anthesis Group, What are Scope 1, 2 & 3 Emissions?](#)
27 [Local Government Association, Scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions for social care: Guidance for local authorities](#)
There have been various initiatives to address this - including the development of the Greenhouse Gas Accounting Tool by the Local Government Association (LGA) and an organisation called Local Partnerships. This tool aims to help councils to report on scope 1, 2 and some scope 3 emissions. But measuring and reporting of Scope 3 emissions in particular remains relatively new and methodologies are still being developed.

Just under 80% of councils in the UK have now published climate action plans. Climate Emergency (CEUK), a UK charity focussed on local climate action, has scored these across a range of areas including the robustness of targets, policy detail, funding, governance and public engagement.

It found big differences in quality. The highest scorers were Somerset and West Taunton (91%), West Midlands Combined Authority (89%), Staffordshire Moorlands (87%) and Solihull (85%). Unitary authorities tended to score slightly higher than district and county councils. That said, district councils including Oxford, Lancaster and Norwich are among the leading pioneers of local climate action - and benefit from an ability to be much closer to their communities.

The biggest difference in CEUK’s tracker was between the four nations: Scottish councils scored better than councils in England, while councils in Wales and Northern Ireland scored significantly worse.

The average score across all UK local authorities was 46%, suggesting there is plenty of room for improvement (The LGA, the Energy Systems Catapult and CEUK have provided resources and examples of best practice for councils to draw on).

In addition 84 councils across the UK have not yet published any climate action plan, including 38 district councils, three county councils and 43 other councils.

**Local authorities are undertaking a range of activities to reduce emissions and adapt to climate change**

Local authorities are already undertaking a range of actions to reduce emissions. A study of English councils found examples including switching public buildings to renewable energy, retrofitting social housing stock, providing group buying programmes to allow affordable access to solar panels,
installing electric vehicle charge points, and providing targeted funding to local businesses to reduce their carbon footprints.\textsuperscript{31}

Local authority environment directors polled by the LGA identified additional activities including communications campaigns, small-scale solar PV installations, sustainable urban drainage and flood awareness campaigns.\textsuperscript{32} But local climate action across the UK remains a mixed picture, and some local authorities are also making decisions that will increase emissions, such as investing in airport expansion or supporting new road schemes.

Most local authorities do not yet appear to be looking systematically at the emissions impact of decisions across all areas of activity - though some have started to take steps to do this. For example Somerset West and Taunton Council, the highest scorer in the CEUK assessment, has developed a “climate-positive planning policy” which provides additional guidance to ensure planning decisions are in line with the council’s approach to the climate emergency.\textsuperscript{33}

Local authorities in England do not have a statutory duty to reduce emissions in line with climate targets, as the central government does under the 2008 Climate Change Act. There have been some calls for such a duty to be introduced, but most councils appear to question whether this would be the most useful way to stimulate action. Councils already have to show how they meet several other statutory duties, with extremely limited funds, and such requirements can end up creating a culture of jumping through hoops rather than necessarily finding the most innovative ways to tackle local issues.

Local authorities in England do already operate under several duties that have a bearing on climate action. This includes duties to enforce building regulation (including on energy efficiency standards), manage climate risks such as flooding, and protect the environment.

But in Scotland, duties are more extensive. Since 2019, Scottish public sector bodies including local authorities have been legally required to report on:

- their target date for achieving zero direct emissions from their own operations
- targets for reducing indirect emissions, for example from their supply chain
- how their spending aligns with emissions reduction

\textsuperscript{31} National Audit Office, \textit{Local government and net zero in England}
\textsuperscript{32} Local Government Association, \textit{Climate Change Survey February 2020}
\textsuperscript{33} Somerse West and Taunton Council, \textit{Climate positive planning}
Scottish local authorities are also now required to produce local heat and energy efficiency strategies - long-term plans which set out in detail how they will cut building emissions. These extra requirements may have been a factor in Scottish local authorities scoring highest in CEUK’s tracker.

Local areas have a critical role in engaging communities in the net zero transition

A range of expert and industry organisations have supported the idea that local authorities have a particularly important role to play in the next phase of the climate transition because of their close connections with communities.

A housing select committee inquiry singled out the important role local authorities will have in building and maintaining public consent, noting that “local government, through its various roles and responsibilities, could help to ensure that climate action benefitted all communities.” Cadent Gas told the same inquiry that local authorities had critical knowledge “of local stakeholders and the local economy, as well as their relationship and trust with the community.”

The government’s own Net Zero Strategy takes a similar view: “local leaders are well placed to engage with all parts of their communities and to understand local policy, political, social, and economic nuances relevant to climate action.”

It is increasingly acknowledged that public engagement should play a much bigger role in the next phase of the transition. A wide range of public engagement methods are being used around the world with increasing frequency. These can be divided into:

- Participatory forms of engagement, such as co-production, crowdsourcing and participatory budgeting, which typically focus on involving people in decisions which affect their lives

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34 Scottish Government, Leadership in the public sector - Climate change
35 Scottish Government, Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategies: synthesis evaluation
36 Housing select committee, Local government and the path to net zero
37 Housing select committee, Local government and the path to net zero
38 HM Government, Net Zero Strategy
39 Institute for Government, Public engagement and net zero
Deliberative forms of engagement, such as citizens’ assemblies and juries, community conversations and appreciative inquiry, which are more focused on the quality of dialogue. Digital tools and technologies are also opening up a wider range of possibilities for public engagement that is quick and nimble and fits more conveniently into people’s lives.

There has been considerable activity in the UK already. Climate Assembly UK, organised in 2020 by six parliamentary select committees, showed the potential of getting a large “mini-public” to deliberate on the choices facing the country. Several local authorities have organised their own climate assemblies.

But these activities are far from being embedded. At the national level, barriers include that policy makers see public engagement as a ‘regulatory burden’ with little benefit, they lack the resources, and they are concerned that special interest or protest groups could hijack engagement. Ministers are often not enthused by the idea of appearing at odds with a popular cause.

At the local level, part of the explanation is structural. As well as the UK being one of the most centralised countries in the western world, local councils in England in particular tend to cover much larger areas than comparators in other countries, and have fewer councillors - particularly in the case of large unitaries. A recent report by the District Councils Network argued this has a knock on effect on their capacity for community engagement.

Part of the route to strengthening local engagement on climate change may be utilising the strengths of the full range of local government bodies, including parish, town and neighbourhood councils.

But local authorities face barriers to leading on net zero, particularly funding

The Climate Change Committee, the National Audit Office, the Institute for Government and several select committee inquiries have all identified a range of barriers that are currently hindering the role local authorities can play in tackling climate change. These include a lack of capability and expertise,
with experienced staff in climate-related roles often having been among those whose jobs were cut in the last decade, though some councils have started to reappoint new ‘climate officers’.

But the biggest problem is funding. Cuts to central government grant funding have already left some local authorities struggling to deliver “core” services. Many have been forced to cut back on services from street lighting to libraries in the last decade, and long-term green investments can seem hard to justify in such a context.

On top of this, most additional funding currently comes through short-term competitive funding pots. The government acknowledged in its Net Zero Strategy that many local authorities see this as a major barrier to supporting strategic, long-term changes - as well as being a resource-drain in terms of the time taken to write bids.46

The UK government is still developing its approach to financing the transition.47 It has indicated that it will be very market-led, based on creating the right conditions for the private sector and consumers to finance investments. But this will still rely on the government providing sufficient certainty to the market, using public funds strategically to “crowd in” private finance, and unlocking wider barriers in the way of “financing green”.48

In areas such as home upgrades or switching to EVs, financial products will be needed to help people afford upfront investments based on the savings they will make over time. (There are currently over 30 ‘green mortgages’ available in the UK, but green financial products remain relatively niche and will need to be adopted much more widely.)

Local authorities are currently limited more widely in their ability to borrow to fund investments, however they can still play a big role in creating the right conditions for investment and market growth through a range of levers and soft powers they do have, including in relations with local businesses, the planning system, skills and training initiatives, strategic investments and so on.

Alongside this, there are initiatives being developed to support financing the transition at the local level. The Green Finance Institute has worked with councils to develop a ‘Local Climate Bond’ that allows local people to invest in local decarbonisation schemes and make a return over time from doing so. West Berkshire and Warrington councils have already started raising money through the scheme. Analysis has suggested it could raise £3bn in local finance if it was adopted more widely, and potentially much more if it was possible to tap into other forms of savings.49

46 HM Government, Net Zero Strategy
47 Jill Rutter, The Treasury net zero review only offers partial answers
48 Green Finance Institute
49 Rhian Mari-Thomas, Cleaning Up Podcast with Michael Liebreich
These barriers are important for considering the local response to the climate emergency, even if addressing them will require a more coherent and enabling approach from central government. But the effectiveness of local responses will also depend on the extent to which local authorities involve their communities in climate transitions. How well the public understands the role of local government, generally and in tackling climate change, will be critical to this. These are the questions to which this report now turns.
What do people know about local government?

There is extensive data on public attitudes towards government in the UK. Most well covered are levels of trust and satisfaction, which have been declining generally, but tend to be higher in local government. Understanding of government - related to trust and satisfaction but distinct - is less tracked, but the evidence points to it being fairly limited. There is widespread confusion about what local authorities do and how responsibilities are divided between different tiers.

Trust in government has been declining

Levels of trust in government in the UK have been in pretty steady decline for more than three decades. While around half of people still say they trust the government sometimes, data from the British Social Attitudes Survey shows that there has been a big (and important) increase in the amount of people who do so “almost never” - now almost 40% of respondents, compared with just over 10% when the survey began 35 years ago.50

Ipsos Mori’s Veracity Index shows a similarly low level of trust in government, with just 19% of people saying they trust government ministers.51 And it is not just government: trust in MPs more generally, and in Parliament as an institution, has also declined.52 The latest Audit of Political Engagement by the Hansard Society found opinions of the system of governing were at the “lowest point in the audit’s history”; worse even than the aftermath of the 2009 MPs’ expenses scandal.53

Several factors appear to be driving declining trust in Whitehall and Westminster. While slightly more people associate a lack of trust with the people (ie politicians) than the system, most cite both. In England, the decline has been strongly concentrated in areas away from the capital, with people reporting intensifying feelings of powerlessness and disengagement.54

Declining trust shouldn’t be confused with apathy. The Audit of Political Engagement and other studies reveal generally consistent levels of political engagement when people are asked about how likely they are to vote or how interested they are in politics.

50 IPPR, Trust issues: Dealing with distrust in politics
51 Ipsos, Veracity Index: Trust in the police drops for the second year in a row
52 IPPR, Trust issues: Dealing with distrust in politics
53 Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement 16 (2019)
54 IPPR, Trust issues: Dealing with distrust in politics
Do you trust the government to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?

- Almost always
- Almost never
- Most of the time
- Some of the time

Figure 7 - Trust in government (Source: IPPR analysis of British Social Attitudes Survey)

Certainty to vote, interest in, and knowledge of politics

- Certainty to vote
- Interest in politics
- Knowledge of parliament
- Knowledge of politics

Figure 8 - Certainty to vote, and interest in and knowledge of politics (Source: Audit of Political Engagement | Hansard Society)
Responses to these questions vary by demographic: men and those from higher socio-economic classes tend to report higher levels of political engagement, while around a quarter of the population reports having no interest in politics. But there does not appear to be evidence of a significant increase in apathy.

Instead, many people lack confidence that governing institutions are responsive to their needs and can deliver meaningful changes in their lives (this finding emerges from much of the public attitudes literature, and was seen as part of the explanation for the result of the Brexit vote).

We may infer that, as a result of this, people also lack a strong motivation to understand those political institutions – particularly when they appear needlessly complex.

**Trust in local government is generally higher**

Trust in local government is considerably higher than central government – and has survived despite some of the trends seen at the national level. In 2021, 44% of people said they trust local councillors, compared to just 19% for government ministers and politicians more generally. While this is a big gap, trust in local councillors is still much lower than in other professions, such as doctors and teachers.

![Bar chart showing trust in various professions](data:image/png;base64,emcontent)

Data source: Ipsos MORI, Base 1,000 and 1,009 British adults aged 18+, Oct-Nov 2021

55 [Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement 16 (2019)]
56 [Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement 16 (2019)]
57 [Ipsos, Veracity Index: Trust in the police drops for the second year in a row]
Figure 9 - Trust in local government compared with other institutions (Source: Ipsos Veracity Index: Trust in the police drops for the second year in a row)

According to political scientist Gerry Stoker, in Western Europe long running surveys like Eurobarometer have typically shown higher levels of trust in local government than central government.\(^{58}\) The reasons for this include perceptions of performance and feelings of shared identity.

Other recent surveys support this, showing that people report much higher levels of trust in local councillors when asked about who should make decisions in their local areas.

Who do you trust to make decisions about how services are delivered in your area?

![Bar chart showing trust in local government compared with other institutions]

Source: Survation polling

Figure 9 - Trust in ministers, MPs and local councillors (Source: Survation | Councillors most trusted to provide local services)

There is growing interest in the idea that opportunities to participate in decision making are an important driver of trust - and could create a more virtuous relationship between citizens and government which allows for better policy making.

For example Polly Mackenzie, chief executive of Demos and former special adviser to Nick Clegg, has argued that a radically different model of policy making, based on much more public engagement, is needed to tackle the major challenges we face, including climate change.\(^{59}\)

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\(^{58}\) Stoker notes a more mixed picture internationally, with concerns in some areas that lower tiers of government have less effective checks on corruption. Stoker G, Trust and local government: a positive relationship, F.Teles (Ed) Handbook of Local Government Research [forthcoming]

\(^{59}\) Demos, Making Democracy Work
Evidence from countries with deeper experience of involving citizens in decision making supports this. For instance in Sweden, opportunities to participate in decision making have long been seen as an important driver of high levels of trust in local government.60

In the UK, a slightly higher proportion of people feel they have influence over their local area than national decisions, 23% versus 14%.61 But over 40% feel they have no influence over either.62 This suggests there may be considerable scope for local areas to build trust further by more actively involving the public in decisions.

But while attitudes towards local government are clearly distinct from (and more positive than) attitudes towards central government, local councils have not been fully insulated from worsening trends in public opinion.

**Satisfaction with local government has fallen, but is still higher than with central government**

Satisfaction with local government in the UK has been worsening for more than a decade. A 2009 study by Ipsos Mori reported that average satisfaction was down from 53% to 45%, with satisfaction dropping below 50% for the first time since the statutory surveys were introduced.63

Over a decade on, in 2021, satisfaction had fallen further still, with just 41% of people in England satisfied with their local council, and 24% dissatisfied.64 Another 2021 survey showed people’s confidence in local authorities had worsened since just before the pandemic.65

Beneath these figures lies significant variation, by area and by service type. In the 2021 Ipsos survey, 47% of people in the South West were satisfied compared with only 35% in the West Midlands. People report being least satisfied with the poor condition of roads and pavements, and with areas not being well looked after (common issues include litter, graffiti and dog mess).66

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63 Ipsos MORI Local, *People, Perceptions and Place*

64 Ipsos MORI, *Attitudes towards Local Area polling*

65 Yougov, *Confidence in Local Councils*

66 Survation, *More local say, parks, and fix the roads- the view of people in 'left behind' areas*
The crucial context for the declining satisfaction is the steep decline in local authority budgets since 2010 shown in Figure 3. The relationship between the two is worth drawing out. Analysis for the Institute for Government’s annual Performance Tracker series found that initially cuts were achieved in many areas without a decline in performance, as efficiency savings were made. Indeed other work has shown a range of examples, including the “Wigan deal” in primary health and care, where reduced budgets forced councils to rethink and redesign services to be more citizen-led, and actually improved performance.

But the IfG’s analysis has shown that subsequent cuts - as the Coalition government continued to bear down on budgets even after inefficiencies had been driven out - led to significant falls in the scope and quality of services. Worsening satisfaction with local authorities in the late 2010s and early 2020s may be ascribed in large part to councils simply having less money to spend, but it is unclear to what extent people know this or factor it into their judgements.

And despite this recent decline, satisfaction with local government is still higher than with central government. The latter fluctuates more, but European Social Survey data shows it has consistently been below 35% over the last two decades.

**Public understanding of local government is relatively low**

While the public trusts and is more satisfied with local than national government, it does not appear to have a good understanding of what local government does. This opinion was shared by everyone we spoke to – pollsters, local government experts and officials, practitioners who run deliberative exercises with local communities, and academics.

There is not consistent data on how well the public feel they understand local government in the UK, but the public attitudes work that does exist points to generally low levels of understanding (with some variation by service). According to several interviewees, local councils often run their own private surveys which tend to reveal limited understanding of what they are responsible for, and how responsibilities are divided between different tiers of government.

Ipsos Mori has found that councils often get blamed for things for which they are not responsible, and conversely get no credit for improvements for which they are. Even when citizens have noticed that

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67 Institute for Government, *Performance Tracker*
68 The King’s Fund, *Lessons from the Wigan Deal*
69 Institute for Government, *Performance Tracker*
70 HM Government, *Public Perceptions of Standards in Public Life in the UK and Europe*
local streets are cleaner, for example, they don’t think better of local councils because they don’t realise that they are responsible.\textsuperscript{71}

Many people are not even aware of the different tiers of local government in their areas. Knowledge of even seemingly high-profile local leaders can be surprisingly low: for instance in 2018 almost half of Londoners said they were unaware that they have a Mayor with powers that affect their lives.\textsuperscript{72} Discussions during citizens’ assemblies have also revealed limited understanding of local government and its role in different areas of policy making.

Understanding varies by service. Some services are highly visible – experts in particular mentioned recycling and waste as a service which many residents would be able to identify as something carried out by their local council. While there was no public polling available on this, experts suggested awareness would vary between different demographics in a community: parents would be more likely to be aware of the role local authorities play in overseeing (some) schools, while more elderly people (or people with elderly relatives) would be likely to be aware of its role on social care.

Campaigners or others with an interest in local politics are likely to have a stronger understanding of roles and responsibilities. Controversial interventions made by local authorities might also have broadened awareness – for instance we heard evidence that local authorities deciding to implement Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) had led to increased knowledge of their role in reducing transport emissions. Even so, local government experts thought those who were actively interested in what their local authorities were doing remained a small minority.

Poor understanding is by no means unique to local government; most people do not have a strong understanding of central government departments, government agencies or regulators either. Indeed, Gerry Stoker argues that most people often make little distinction between different tiers of government; they are more focused on the service they are receiving or tax they are paying, than who is responsible for it.\textsuperscript{73} The exception to this may be very high-profile national politicians, about whom more people have high awareness. But most Whitehall departments or regulators such as Ofgem are likely to be just as poorly understood as local authorities.

Poor understanding may be easier to address at the local level, though. People feel they have a stake in their own area, and public engagement activities and awareness raising activities are easier to

\textsuperscript{71} Ipsos MORI Local, People, Perceptions and Place
\textsuperscript{72} The Centre for Policy Studies, Who Governs Britain?
\textsuperscript{73} Stoker G, Trust and local government: a positive relationship, F.Teles (Ed) Handbook of Local Government Research. Edward Elgar. [forthcoming]
organise on a scale that makes a difference. That said, the evidence suggests there may be a limit to public enthusiasm for understanding the intricacies of local government administration.
What do people think about climate change?

Concern about climate change in the UK has been rising. There is strong support for government taking action to tackle it at the national and local level, and certain measures to reduce emissions appear particularly popular. But there are also some concerns about how the costs and impacts of action will fall - and these are likely to be exacerbated by a growing cost of living crisis in 2022, marked by soaring energy prices and high inflation.

There is rising concern about climate change in the UK

Public concern about the environment and climate change has been rising in the UK for over a decade. In the last three years, however, it has risen more dramatically when compared with other issues.

Up to 2018, the proportion of people listing climate change as a top issue facing the country in YouGov’s tracker rarely topped 10%. It was regularly the seventh or eighth most important issue. Now it is consistently ranked third, behind only the economy and health. It has fallen slightly since COP26, but it remains third, ranked higher than immigration, crime and tax. The most recent and detailed survey commissioned by the government similarly found that 83% of people reported climate change as a concern, around twice as many as a decade ago.

Concern about climate change has sometimes been assumed to be the preserve of wealthy, urban, highly educated and younger voters. This was always a somewhat reductive cliché; now it is straightforwardly wrong. Research by the Institute for Global Change shows climate concern is shared and rising across all demographics - a key feature of the politics of net zero in the UK compared with other countries.

Concern is also spread broadly across the country. Over 80% of people are concerned in both urban and rural areas and sentiment does not appear to vary significantly by region. It also exists across the left-right political spectrum. To the extent that there are areas where concern is slightly lower, these

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74 YouGov, The most important issues facing the country; YouGov, Concern for environment reaches record high in YouGov top issues tracker
75 HM Government, Climate change and net zero public awareness and perceptions summary report
76 There may have been a grain of truth in this characterisation when looking at population trends, but it was a crude simplification. For example there are long traditions of climate change concern and activism in working class communities. See Barasi L, The Climate Majority, Bell and Bain, 2017
77 Tony Blair Institute, Polls Apart: Mapping the Politics of Net Zero
78 Bright Blue, Going greener? Public attitudes to net zero
79 Tony Blair Institute, Polls Apart: Mapping the Politics of Net Zero
are mostly correlated with areas that voted strongly for Brexit and report having a more ‘closed’ (i.e. socially conservative) rather than open mindset. This includes areas that have had a poor deal from previous transitions, for instance the loss of coal mining or heavy industry. However there is no evidence that the UK is vulnerable to the sort of polarisation over climate change seen in the US.

Rather, concern about climate change in the UK appears more robust than it has been in the past. Whereas the 2007-08 financial crash saw concern about climate change fall rapidly, as other worries became more prominent, the Covid-19 pandemic caused only a small dip in levels of concern, which soon bounced back to its previous level.

Studies are beginning to explore attitudes and preferences among ‘segments’ of the population not historically thought to be especially environmentally concerned. For example a report by Climate Outreach looked at segments including ‘loyal nationals’, ‘established liberals’ and ‘civic pragmatists’; it found these groups supported climate action but were often less interested in arguments about ‘sustainability’ than the benefits action might have for the country or their community.

There is strong support for net zero, and understanding of what it means is improving

The UK’s target of reaching net zero is broadly popular, as would be expected given such broad concern. A large majority of people have now heard of the term ‘net zero’, and a government survey found almost 80% said they supported it (when provided with a brief statement clarifying what it meant).

Understanding of what net zero means is improving. Some 39% of people report knowing a lot or a fair amount about it (although this may be interpreted as understanding that it’s a climate target that involves reducing emissions rather than providing a technical definition of what is included, the role of negative emissions and so on). Almost a third say they know hardly anything or nothing about net zero, though. This should not be surprising: “net zero” is an abstract concept and there has been no sustained public communications campaign to raise awareness about what it means.

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80 Tony Blair Institute, Polls Apart: Mapping the Politics of Net Zero
81 Tony Blair Institute, Polls Apart: Mapping the Politics of Net Zero
82 Ally Kingston, Beyond “Sustainability”: How to Engage Non-Activists in the Climate Challenge
83 HM Government, Climate change and net zero public awareness and perceptions summary report
84 HM Government, Climate change and net zero public awareness and perceptions summary report
Even if many people may not report a strong understanding of “net zero”, they are likely to be aware of the need to adapt their lifestyles to tackle climate change. Only a tenth say they think most people will not have to make any changes.  

And importantly, most people appear to have a reasonably good understanding of what activities cause emissions. Indeed, many have already started to make some changes in lifestyle: over two thirds say they recycle more, while over a third say they use cycling and public transport more and eat less meat.

However, people tend to overestimate the importance of some causes of emissions and underestimate the importance of others. There is high awareness when it comes to taking flights and driving petrol or diesel cars, and people are also very familiar with some household interventions such as double glazing and insulating lofts and walls - long a part of efforts to improve energy efficiency.

Fewer people recognise the emissions that result from using their gas boiler. This helps to explain relatively low interest in replacing boilers with low carbon heating systems; for example polling by the centre-right think tank Bright Blue in 2020 found that only 42% of respondents had heard of heat pumps, and only around a fifth had heard of hydrogen boilers and heat networks. Among those

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85 Bright Blue, Going greener? Public attitudes to net zero
86 Bright Blue, Going greener? Public attitudes to net zero
87 Bright Blue, Going greener? Public attitudes to net zero
88 Bright Blue, Going greener? Public attitudes to net zero
89 Bright Blue, Going greener? Public attitudes to net zero
reporting little interest in low-carbon heating, the most common reasons why were a lack of information, followed by concerns about costs.90

People support stronger action on climate change

Most people want the UK government to do more to tackle climate change. In fact, a majority (58%) believe the UK is currently unlikely to meet its net zero target.91 We did not find any polling on how confident people are about (often more ambitious) local targets being met, but we may expect similar scepticism, given many local authorities are themselves unclear on exactly how they will be reached.

The data shows that almost half of people say the UK government is not doing or spending enough to tackle climate change, compared with just 20% who think it is getting the balance right, and 13% who think it is doing and spending too much.92

Of course, the public often gives seemingly contradictory answers when asked such questions by pollsters. It is a cliche that the British public often want more and better public services without having to pay for them.93 And it is true that people have other priorities they want tackled alongside climate change; successful action will need to address wider priorities, whether for secure, affordable, warm homes, or healthier, cleaner communities.

A range of polling, public attitudes and public engagement work suggests that support for stronger action is strong and broad-based, and the public are particularly supportive of certain measures. Polling by Ipsos Mori, for example, found that the strongest support was for frequent flyer levies, changing product pricing and measures to support the replacement of gas and coal boilers.

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90 Bright Blue, Going greener? Public attitudes to net zero
91 Bright Blue, Going greener? Public attitudes to net zero
92 YouGov, How is the UK government handling climate change
93 A cliché that may be somewhat outdated: there has been support for tax rises to fund public services for several years

Ipsos, Britons support paying more tax
To what extent do you support or oppose... 

![Support for net zero policies](image-url) 

Source: IPSOS Mori, Base 2,810, British adults aged 16+, 19-25 Aug 2021

**Figure 11 - Support for net zero policies (Source: Public support majority of net zero policies ... unless there is a personal cost | Ipsos)**

Climate Assembly UK members were similarly enthusiastic about a tax on frequent flyers, and increased investment in low-carbon buses and trains. They were also supportive of some measures that politicians have so far proved less reluctant to consider, including a ban on SUVs and reducing meat and dairy consumption by some 20-40%. In general, people express mixed views when asked if they would like the investments required to reach net zero to be paid for through higher prices or general taxation.

There are various reasons why these sentiments may not yet have been fully translated into action. Politicians have to balance competing concerns: there are many problems the public wants addressed. But also it can often take a long time for changes in public attitudes to feed through into politics - and politicians already had some misconceptions about what the public thinks about climate change. Academic Becky Willis has shown that politicians have consistently underestimated the breadth of climate change concern, and conversely overestimated opposition to environmental policies, such as wind farms.

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94 Climate Assembly UK, *The path to net zero*  
95 Bright Blue, *Going greener? Public attitudes to net zero*  
96 Willis R, *Too Hot to Handle? The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change*, Bristol University Press, 2020
Some people have concerns about how costs will be distributed

Key to building support for net zero policies - and maintaining it as they are implemented - will be ensuring costs and impacts are fairly distributed.

There has been a growing drumbeat around the cost of net zero since the UK government adopted its target, with some Conservative backbenchers and media outlets arguing it will be too expensive. Several newspapers have run front page headlines about “boiler taxes” and wider costs people might face as a result of net zero.

Expert analysis - from the Climate Change Committee, the Office for Budget Responsibility, HM Treasury and others - suggests that net zero is affordable and the costs of inaction would be much higher. The overall cost is estimated to be less than 1% of GDP per year between now and 2050. But large upfront investments will be needed, and the way these costs are distributed will be critical.

The Ipsos polling cited above found that, unsurprisingly, support for most measures fell slightly when people were made aware that they might impose costs on them or require them to make lifestyle changes. Negative coverage about the costs of net zero may also be having some effect on public perceptions.

The challenge for local and national politicians in the coming years will be persuading people that the transition will be affordable, beneficial and fair. Fairness in particular has emerged as a key principle from much of the public engagement work: Climate Assembly UK members emphasised the need for changes to be fair to people in all parts of the UK, and people with different incomes, travel preferences and housing arrangements.

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97 Institute for Government, Paying for net zero
98 Climate Assembly UK, The path to net zero
What do people think about local government and climate change?

The public wants local authorities to play a key role in tackling climate change. They think climate change is already impacting their local areas, and local decision makers are well placed to understand their priorities. But there is low awareness about what local authorities currently do, and what they could do in future.

There has been little polling on net zero policy preferences conducted at the local level, although climate assemblies have started to produce some evidence. Successful climate action will need to appeal to the priorities people have for their local areas.

People think local authorities should play an important role in tackling climate change

The public see climate change as affecting other countries more than the UK or their local area, but over half of people in the UK think that their local area has already been affected. This accords with a wide range of climate impacts increasingly being felt - from increased flooding to problems associated with hotter, drier summers.

We did not find data on perceptions of climate impacts by region, but they are likely to be strongest in those areas that have experienced particular extreme weather events, including Scotland and the North of England which have seen recent bouts of storms and flooding.

People think local authorities have an important role in addressing these impacts and taking wider action to tackle climate change, including reducing emissions. Polling suggests people tend to ascribe the highest degree of responsibility to national government, but most people in the UK also think local government has an important role.

Some international polling, which looks at a range of countries including the UK, suggests people tend to rank local authorities below central government and citizens/consumers in terms of who they expect to take action to tackle climate change.

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99 HM Government, Climate change and net zero public awareness and perceptions summary report
100 HM Government, Climate change and net zero public awareness and perceptions summary report
101 Ipsos Mori, EDF polling
The Bright Blue polling found that 82% of people in the UK think the central government has a high degree of responsibility for reducing emissions - and a majority of those ascribed to it the highest level of responsibility possible (on a scale of 0-10). But 78% of people think local government also has a high degree of responsibility, if not quite as high as that of central government.102

This suggests that people have some awareness that there are a range of net zero-related decisions which will need to be taken in Westminster - and local action will partly depend on these decisions - although further research might explore how the public sees the balance of responsibility.

Other studies suggest a majority would like to see the balance of resources tipped more towards local government. Survation found 74% of people think local communities will have to respond to climate change, while two thirds say they want the central government to provide more money for local authorities to address climate change locally.103

It is worth drawing out the distinction between local communities and local authorities. In general polling and public engagement has found very strong support for climate action to be driven by local communities. Councils are important actors within these communities - they hold key levers and have administrative capabilities - but an effective response will rely on them working alongside other local organisations and community groups.

**It is unclear what exactly people think local authorities are, or should be, doing**

While people are enthusiastic about local authorities tackling climate change in general, they are often uncertain about what their current role is. This follows from the generally low understanding of local authorities and different tiers of government already described.

In particular, people are unlikely to be aware of the full range of activities a local authority might undertake to address climate change, including less high-profile or visible activities such as retrofitting council buildings and social housing and reducing emissions in procurement and supply chains. They also may not be aware of major constraints on what local authorities can do, particularly around funding and wider capacity.

Climate Assembly UK members were generally supportive of an important role for local government, but reported a lack of understanding of what local authorities can and can’t do - and where they rely

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102 Bright Blue, *Going greener? Public attitudes to net zero*
103 Survation, *Councillors Most Trusted to Provide Local Services*
on central government taking action first.\textsuperscript{104} Local climate assemblies organised in Leeds and Camden similarly reported confusion among members about what services local authorities could reasonably be held responsible for.\textsuperscript{105}

While there is a wide range of polling about the policies people want to see pursued at the national level to reduce emissions, there has been less work looking at local priorities.

We found a particular gap in the polling and wider research in terms of understanding which particular actions on climate change people would like to see driven at the local level - and their perceptions of the extent to which this is happening.

This inhibits our understanding - not least given that some of the popular policies identified in national polling, like taxes and levies, are squarely within the remit of central government.

However the polling and public engagement work that does exist points to some priorities that are relevant to local authorities. For example there often appears to be particularly strong support for investment in walking and cycling, low-carbon public transport options, subsidies for upgrading homes, and investment in green spaces.\textsuperscript{106}

We did not find any evidence of a major mismatch between what people expect local authorities to be doing on climate change, and what is within their powers and capacity to do, but further polling on this could be helpful.

Notably there is also support for increased communication and awareness-raising to tackle poor understanding. For example the Leeds Climate Assembly called for a \textit{“large scale communication drive”} including through social media, community engagement, advertising and education, with a focus on \textit{“clear, positive and practical messages which emphasise the necessity for individuals, community and organisational action at all levels”}.\textsuperscript{107}

It may be the case that there are some areas - such as local nature interventions, decisions about walking and cycling and public transport - where people feel it is particularly important for climate action to be designed locally, factoring in local concerns.

\textsuperscript{104} Climate Assembly UK, \textit{The path to net zero}

\textsuperscript{105} Leeds Climate Change Citizens’ Jury; Camden Citizens’ Assembly on climate crisis

\textsuperscript{106} Survation, Councillors Most Trusted to Provide Local Services; Leeds Climate Change Citizens’ Jury; Camden Citizens’ Assembly on climate crisis

\textsuperscript{107} Leeds Climate Change Citizens’ Jury recommendations
As well as a lack of polling, there is also a gap in terms of understanding where local concerns are not being met. If there were particular areas where citizens thought local action was falling short of expectations, for example, identifying and drawing attention to these could also be a useful way of applying pressure to bring about change.

**Climate action is not typically the top priority people have for their local areas**

Most people do not directly cite actions to reduce emissions when asked what they most want to see improved in their local areas. Polling by Ipsos Mori last year found the biggest priorities people had were more opportunities for young people, livelier high streets, reduced crime and more affordable housing.

**Priorities for your local area**

Which two or three features of your neighbourhood would you like to see most improved?

![Figure 12 - Priorities for your local area](image)

This reinforces the point that action to reduce emissions will need to be designed as part of strategies which make people feel better about their local communities, whether that is boosting local employment or making housing more affordable. Polling by Ipsos Mori in 2021 found that (somewhat unsurprisingly) 63% of people said they wanted to see more green skills and jobs in their areas. ¹⁰⁸

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¹⁰⁸ [UK100, Power Shift](https://www.uk100.org.uk)
Another good example of how this can work in practice is Ipswich aiming to become the UK’s first “15-minute town” - a scheme with clear community as well as climate benefits. The concept was developed in Paris neighbourhoods, and refers to people being able to live, work and have the other things they need for a fulfilled life within a 15-minute walk.\footnote{\textit{BBC News, Ipswich aims to become 'UK's first 15-minute' town}} Climate goals will often be best achieved by emphasising their non-climate benefits; how they can improve people’s lives rather than how they achieve a reduction in a city’s carbon footprint.

Separate polling, conducted by BritainThinks, found that ‘green and natural spaces’ were one of the top four things people valued in their local area.\footnote{\textit{Britain Thinks, Local Government Association Public Opinion Research}} Such spaces may only have a small direct impact on emissions (for example as carbon sinks), but as part of a package of measures aimed at building support for a cleaner, more healthy community they could play an outsized role.

**Public engagement is being used to help inform local climate action**

Local climate action is arguably the area where there is most innovation with the use of public engagement in the UK. A growing number of local authorities have organised citizens assemblies or used other methods to crowdsource ideas or involve the public in decisions.

Climate Citizens - a research initiative led by Becky Willis, who also acted as an expert witness for Climate Assembly UK - have kept track of the growing number of examples. These include climate assemblies and juries held in Leeds, Camden, Oxford, Brighton & Hove, Lancaster and Kendal.\footnote{\textit{Climate Citizens, Other initiatives and resources}}

The exercises tend to have been organised by upper-tier local authorities with greater resources, but many smaller authorities have conducted some degree of public engagement as part of their consultations in developing climate action plans.

Several councils have also appointed task forces or other groups involving citizens to scrutinise and feed into plans. For example Birmingham has a “Route to Zero Task Force” of people from a wide range of backgrounds, parties, and ages.\footnote{\textit{Local Authority CLIMATE Action Plan Checklist}}

These activities have several benefits. They allow local authorities to gain a much richer understanding of their citizens’ concerns and priorities, including how they respond when given additional information about the powers and resources a local authority may have, and the
constraints they may be operating under. As well as a tool for informing policy making, they serve as a way of improving understanding and building consent and legitimacy for action within a community.

This combination can be particularly helpful when it comes to potentially controversial changes. Deliberative workshops have identified several lessons about introducing LTNs, for example. Councils should take particular care to set out a credible rationale for LTNs (including evidence on how they reduce traffic and improve air quality) and how progress will be monitored; they should provide maps (including on sat-nav) and wider information to help residents navigate and understand them; and they should include a ‘grace period’ and consider allowing some exemptions (eg blue badge holders). Such practical lessons can be critical to building successful coalitions for change.

Research by the Place-based Climate Action Network (PCAN) has argued that increasing knowledge and understanding is a key benefit of public engagement. While many local areas may find they have large and active “pressure groups” who noisily argue for change, these need to be balanced against “the scale, cost and complexity of change”. Deliberative exercises are a good way of bringing these people together with other - often less vocal - groups in order to gain a shared understanding of how to design a transition that would secure support from across the community.

**Local citizen engagement on climate change needs to be broadened and deepened**

However there is an important question about the current scale and reach of local climate engagement. Local authorities and communities have a big opportunity to build trust and support for change if they are able to extend the scope of their citizen engagement.

While citizens assemblies have been the most common and high-profile form of engagement, they have still only been conducted by a relatively small number of local authorities, while others may feel they lack the capability or resources to do them well. Capacity-building will be key. Public engagement charity Involve has developed a Local Climate Engagement initiative that uses training, mentoring, peer-learning and wider support to help build capability for using public engagement tools at the local level.

Citizens’ assemblies also tend to only be able to include up to 100 people, which means they are of limited use as an awareness raising activity in a large area. It may be that there is an opportunity for assemblies and other emerging methods to be combined with digital tools and approaches to support

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113 NatCen, Low Traffic Neighbourhoods
114 PCAN, Trends in Local Climate Action in the UK
115 Involve, How can local authorities engage the public on climate decision-making?
effective local action. Previous research by mySociety identified a range of ways in which digital tools could enhance deliberative exercises and reduce costs.\textsuperscript{116} They can be utilised for various purposes including gathering questions and initial views, identifying experts and stakeholders, sharing information, facilitating debate and communicating experiences.

There are also efforts to develop more dynamic processes that allow citizens to more actively propose ideas and solutions, and build support for them - as opposed to simply saying what they think or feel. Demos’ Jon Nash has been trialling one such method called ‘Combined Choice’, for example.\textsuperscript{117}

Case studies and interviews have revealed several further factors that help local public engagement on climate change to work effectively. New Local found that the Camden climate assembly showed that engagement works best when it is tied to a particular policy making process - in that case the development of the council’s climate action plan - so participants have a clear idea of how they are feeding in.\textsuperscript{118}

A report by the Institute for Government and public engagement charity Involve recommended that public engagement activities need to: include a wide range of stakeholders alongside member of the public to increase quality and impact, including local civic groups, civil society organisations, businesses, academics and professional organisations; and be genuinely inclusive, for example by covering the costs of participation, supporting those without digital skills and allowing enough time to build relationships.\textsuperscript{119}

These activities clearly need to be accompanied by wider efforts to open up processes and raise awareness. For example, people report that it is often unclear who within a council they should talk to if they have a concern, which points to the need for better communications. Councils may also need to be willing to engage with citizens in non-traditional forums: for instance Facebook groups are often a way in which local people discuss problems.\textsuperscript{120}

If local authorities are to fully seize their potential role in the climate transition, they may need to rethink various aspects of how they relate to their citizens.

\textsuperscript{116} mySociety, Digital Tools for Citizens Assemblies
\textsuperscript{117} New Local, Combined Choice: a new approach to community engagement
\textsuperscript{118} New Local, Communities vs Climate Change: the power of local action
\textsuperscript{119} Institute for Government, Public engagement and net zero
\textsuperscript{120} New Local, Communities vs Climate Change: the power of local action
Conclusion

Local authorities are set to play a critical role in the UK’s net zero transition over the next thirty years. They exercise influence over a third of all UK emissions - more if you consider their wider impact on the behaviour of citizens - and have important responsibilities when it comes to preparing for the impacts of climate change.

There is consensus that enabling this local role is particularly important for achieving net zero. The transition is going to involve major changes in people’s lifestyles, and the pathway and choices involved will vary across the country.

Local authorities are widely seen as best placed to understand local priorities and concerns and ensure that the net zero transition maintains public legitimacy and consent. There is broad support for acting on climate change, but the transition is going to involve difficult choices and decisions. While the transition away from fossil fuels will ultimately help protect against the sort of energy supply shocks seen in the last six months, the current cost of living crisis still makes it harder to make the short-term case for why tackling climate change should remain a priority.

So far, the focus in terms of enabling local climate action has largely been on local authorities lacking sufficient resources, and the absence of a clear framework for how local and national government should work together. This has been identified in the work of select committees, the National Audit Office, and several think tanks - and acknowledged as a problem by the government itself in its Net Zero Strategy.

However, this literature review has identified four further barriers to an effective local response to climate change in the UK, which mySociety may be able to play a useful role in tackling:

**Education and awareness raising** - public concern about climate change and support for stronger action to tackle it is shared broadly across the UK; however, there is a lack of awareness about who is responsible for tackling it, and what actions will be most important when it comes to reducing emissions. This is not helped by a wider (and very understandable) confusion about the way local government in the UK works. In general, local responses will be best supported by citizens being well informed, about what activities cause emissions, what actions are possible to reduce them, and who can support those actions. It would help if people better understood local authorities and their role on climate change. That said, it may be wise to focus on the service being delivered and its relevance to citizens; there appears to be limited appetite for trying to understand the intricacies of the UK’s local government settlement. There have been some initiatives to assess what local authorities are doing -
notably an assessment by Climate Emergency UK, which is set to become a useful annual benchmarking exercise. But it is still not necessarily straightforward for people to quickly identify what is happening in their local area, or what other areas are doing. Information on local authority websites may not be easy to access. Addressing these information and awareness gaps could play an important role in building a stronger foundation for local climate action.

**Public engagement tools and methods** - local authorities are increasingly using forums such as citizens' assemblies to involve their citizens in deliberating about the choices ahead. These can be very effective for informing people about these choices, discussing trade-offs and building legitimacy for a course of action. But they have so far been relatively small in scale and reach. There is a large potential for digital tools to be used to engage citizens more widely in democratic processes, and to be used to support different (and potentially more radical) methods of public engagement, but by and large this has not been tapped into. As part of work on climate change, there could be scope for further supporting initiatives to strengthen local citizen engagement - and address barriers to uptake, including of digital tools. More widely, the outcomes and findings of citizen engagement can provide a useful resource for others facing similar questions, but currently outputs are not always easily accessible.

**Public opinion and local preferences** - there is a large amount of data about people's preferences for national-level policies; however, less polling on public attitudes has looked at policy preferences at the local level - and sought to understand what people support and why. Over time this gap is likely to increasingly be filled as more local authorities seek to develop and build on initial climate action plans, and become more concerned with how to manage difficult trade-offs and continue to maintain public support. But there would be value in conducting some initial work in the near-term. It could also be useful for websites or portals on local climate action to bring together work on local climate attitudes to support the goal of building understanding of what is driving preferences at the local level.

**Monitoring and tracking progress** - most local authorities have adopted ambitious net zero targets and published climate action plans setting out how they intend to meet these. But there is confusion about what targets cover, and it is not clear how progress against them will be tracked. The effective measurement and tracking of emissions at a local level is still being developed, which reduces the ability of citizens to understand what progress is being made, and inhibits their potential role in applying pressure at the local level. There may be various useful roles including building capacity at the lower end or helping to shine a light on best practice. For example leading local areas may wish to create live dashboards which could act as exemplars of climate transparency, showing progress being made against key climate objectives.