Prototyping report

Fair transition and the world of work

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Summary

This is a report on the fourth of a series of “prototyping weeks” run by mySociety in 2022. The central question for the week was:

**What role could digital services play in enabling a fair (or just) transition to a world that’s reducing climate risks and harm?**

*Analysis by IPPR* showed that the UK’s decarbonisation could create 1.7 million jobs by 2035, in sectors from transport to home retrofit and low-carbon electricity. However, local authorities are facing deep challenges right now around the number of “green workers”—like retrofit coordinators or heat pump installers—required to achieve the net zero goal in their areas.

Our opening workshop of the week identified a number of challenges in this area, including incentivising employers to create inclusive jobs, and helping people find better jobs right now. But we chose to focus on a service that could help communicate the scale of change required in an area, and inspire people to take up alternative careers that would contribute to decarbonisation.

Our prototype, ‘Your Green Future’, attempted to explore the sort of tone that would be most effective in a service like this, who might benefit most from the service, and whether data generated by the service could contribute to local authorities’ climate planning.

The prototype’s positive tone went down well with testers, and there was clearly value in matching users’ skills with potential jobs, and then matching those jobs with local authorities’ needs based on publicly available data. However, we had difficulty understanding how local authorities could contribute to and benefit from a service like this, and we were also unable to reach any trade unions or industry bodies to understand their needs in this space.

We are keen to follow other developments in this space – in particular Autonomy’s work on ASPECTT, which may open up entirely new ways to explore skills gaps and career pathways in green transition. We would also be interested to learn more about the role of local authorities in shaping training and employment in their areas, in case there is a way our experience with this prototype could be applied to a tool that more directly influences fair transition in local authorities’ climate responses.
About the prototyping weeks

mySociety is the charity behind UK civic services like TheyWorkForYou, WriteToThem, and WhatDoTheyKnow. We build open, digital solutions to help repower democracy, in the UK and around the world.

Our Climate programme has the goal of facilitating the reduction of the ~30% of UK carbon emissions that are either directly controlled or influenced by local government. We are doing this by deploying data and digital services to support a faster, fairer, more collaborative response to climate, enabled by local democratic institutions and processes.

We believe that digital services have a role to play via:

- More public participation to drive political action
- Local government learning, action and innovation
- A better information ecosystem around local democratic climate action

We’re exploring ideas for new digital services, and actively looking to identify opportunities to work with and in support of other organisations. One way we’re doing this is through prototyping weeks – where we work with others to research, explore, prototype and test ideas.

Themes for each prototyping week are chosen in advance, and participants for the week are invited from our own network of contacts, as well as relevant industry / public sector networks.

The theme for the prototyping week and therefore the subject of this report was enabling a fair transition as part of the UK’s climate response. What follows is a summary of what we did and found during that prototyping week.
Background: fair transition and the world of work

“As with most things in life, the solutions to climate change are neither easy nor free, but they need to be fair. Fair to people with jobs in different sectors. Fair to people with different incomes, travel preferences and housing arrangements. Fair to people who live in different parts of the UK.”

So began the opening statement from the members of the UK’s first ever citizens’ assembly on how the UK should tackle climate change – Climate Assembly UK. The assembly went on to encode “fairness within the UK: including for the most vulnerable, in actions not words” as their second most important underpinning principle for the country’s path to net zero (second only to informing and educating everyone).

However, two years on, ‘fair transition’ remains a poorly understood phrase, meaning different things to different groups. Some see it as shorthand for ‘giving disadvantaged groups special consideration’, while others feel that a fair transition is one that treats everyone the same.

For this reason, it can be useful to focus on exactly what needs to be fair, and what is being ‘transitioned’ – for example, to focus, as we did in this week’s prototype, on what digital services can do to increase uptake of low-carbon, green jobs in the UK.

Analysis by IPPR showed that the UK’s decarbonisation could create 1.7 million jobs by 2035, in sectors from transport to home retrofit and low-carbon electricity. The scale of this jobs transition will look different in different areas of the UK – the latest data from BEIS shows how energy production makes an outsized contribution to the emissions profile of local authorities like County Durham and Tees Valley, while others, like Thurrock, will have to focus on decarbonising their transport infrastructure if they are to reach their net zero targets.

Studies into how different industries will be affected by decarbonisation—such as this one into oil and gas industries by Platform—often reveal that what workers really care about isn’t “green” jobs, but good, secure, safe jobs, and they are sceptical of central or local government’s ability to make those jobs available through training or investment.

In their Emergency Plan on Green Jobs for Young People, Friends of the Earth emphasise the role the local authorities should play in a fair transition to greener jobs, through enabling greater access to apprenticeships, and backing major public works that would give private suppliers the security to hire those apprentices:

“Local councils have a motivation to reduce local unemployment as well as long-term scarring impacts, and to boost green skills in their locality. [...] A coordinated and large-scale approach to energy-efficiency retrofits by local authorities with guaranteed central
government funding could help address the existing market-driven failure to skill up new and existing construction workers.”

The Scottish Government’s Just Transition Commission has also laid out an ambitious call for public bodies to drive action through their access to public finance (such as the Scottish National Investment Bank) and the investment of public pension funds.

It is clear then, that a fair transition in the world of work will involve, at least:

- Local authorities – who may have leverage through training and apprenticeship schemes, and their influence over educational institutions in their area.
- A number of central government departments, including BEIS, DEFRA, DLUHC, and DWP.
- Universities, colleges, and training providers.
- Trade unions such as Prospect, Unison, Unite, RMT, and PCS.
- Workers’ alliances and associations such as Greener Jobs Alliance, Land Workers Alliance, and Farming the Future.
- Pressure groups pushing for green/fair transition, such as Green New Deal Rising, Campaign Against Climate Change, The Women’s Budget Group, and Wen.
- Private businesses – particularly those in carbon-intensive industries such as energy, construction and transport, and those providing green alternatives.
- Workers and job seekers of all types – including those from minoritised groups who are often excluded from traditional job markets.

There have also been a number of digital initiatives attempting to help people into “green careers” through training (such as The Green Register) or skill matching (such as Green New Careers and Work on Climate). Research organisation Autonomy is currently working on an ambitious, multi-dimensional database of jobs, skills, qualifications, and technologies, called ASPECTT, which could eventually help industry and policy makers design evidence-based transition plans for workforces across the UK.

In general it seems that there are a number of options for listing=finding new jobs, but perhaps less on setting a tangible “vision” of the scale of change that will be required in the local jobs landscape, if the UK is to reach its 2050 net zero target.
Workshop outputs

We were joined by participants with experience of the green job market for the week’s opening prototyping workshop, aimed at uncovering the challenges and opportunities around supporting a fair transition as part of the UK’s climate response.

Successes

We used a 'lightning decision jam' format first, to gather examples of success indicators and challenges. Positives included:

- The immediate and obvious benefits of a fair transition – such as reducing inequality, sharing prosperity more inclusively (including to those who aren’t in work) and enabling everyone to feel secure.
- The large number of organisations already doing work in this area, from encouraging regenerative land use, to building a database of the skills required for each job in the UK, or advertising climate tech careers.
- Examples of local authorities in-sourcing (bringing work in-house, building up new skills in their employees).
- The diversity of “green jobs” outside of the usual suspects – as one participant put it, “even wind farms need websites, comms managers, illustrators, cleaners…”
- The opportunity brought about by COVID-19 – a changed attitude towards work life balance, and the meaning of work.
- The potential for decentralisation – building more autonomous, self-sufficient local communities and economies.

Challenges

Challenges noted by participants included:

- Resistance to change – often because of a perceived lack of attractive (eg: well paid, secure, interesting) “green” jobs.
- The danger of being left behind – not all new jobs will map directly to old jobs, and some may be left out of work.
- The difficulty of visualising the change that will be required nationally, or in your area.
- Confusion over the definition of “green jobs” – makes communicating change difficult.
- The danger of forgetting the most vulnerable segment of society – the people who don’t have regular work (like kids, older people, mothers, migrants, etc).
- The low wages for a number of entry-level “green” jobs.
- The dependence on volunteering in “for good” jobs, and the burn out and financial exclusion that this can cause.
Themes

Related successes and challenges were then prioritised through dot-voting, drawn out into groups, and investigated through the generation of “how might we” statements on four overall themes.

This week’s workshop evolved more organically than previous weeks, and after identifying the above challenges, the group naturally started to discuss some of the key stakeholders in the fair transition process – including local authorities, businesses, job seekers / trainees, and under-represented communities. Discussion of the needs and abilities of these user groups then led to the generation of “how might we” statements on three overall themes, shown below.

Through consideration of these statements, along with quick-fire “Rapid Eights” ideation and open discussion, a number of potential ideas for prototyping emerged, which we have listed below, under each theme.

Incentivising employers to create inclusive jobs

How might we help local authorities build better relationships with businesses? How might we help councils generate green jobs? How might we make local government training better / more accountable? How might we make sure everyone’s needs are reflected in local plans for the future?

Ideas for testing included:

- A ‘green inclusive jobs’ standard – perhaps taking inspiration from the UK B Corporation movement, Investors In People, and Living Wage accreditation.
- A ‘career carbon calculator’ – helping people quantify the carbon impact of their current job, and incentivising employers to take carbon impact into account if they want to keep and attract workers.
  - Could potentially include sliders so you can customise the ranking based on what you care about, eg: if you’re suspicious of “net zero” effectiveness.
  - It was noted that SECC will soon require very granular carbon accounting from publicly traded organisations in the USA.
- An open library of RoSPA-like illustrations, for a range of jobs, highlighting every point where a job/workplace could be ‘greened’ – library could then be used by campaigners in infographics, etc.
- Climate literacy resources for local councillors.

Helping people find a better job NOW

How might we help adult job seekers / trainees see the potential of green jobs? How might we get people onto the career ladder they want, quicker? How might we encourage school career advisors to push green jobs over all other jobs?
In particular, the group was keen to look beyond the regular job listing sites. How could we use information about people, and their local areas, to provide targeted advice or information about the most useful training routes?

Ideas for testing included:

- ‘Career Upgrade’ service – using tools like the Autonomy ASPECTT database to show ‘upgrade paths’ from your current job, to cleaner, more secure jobs that use or build on the skill set you already have.
  - Perhaps we could identify skills via a quiz, like Green New Careers in the USA?
- A current day jobs website which uses visuals to show what effect jobs can have on real streets in the area.
- AI-generated examples of ‘people like you’ doing a green job.

**Visualising the jobs of the future**

How might we show people ‘the jobs of 2035’? How might we visualise what the economic transformation looks like? How might we give councils a tool to gather public input on alternate visions of their area? How might we help citizens engage with local authorities on the changes that are required in their area?

Ideas for testing included:

- ‘The jobs of 2035’ – a fake jobs website showing a utopian future with great jobs and salaries.
- ‘Your area needs…’ – a dashboard of job supply and demand, over the next 5–10 years, based on the specific mitigation and adaptation needs of your local authority area (using, eg: emissions data, demographic data, EPC data, local authority climate targets).
- ‘Sim City: Fair Transition Edition’ – get people experimenting with changes to work, infrastructure, and planning in their area.
Prototype: Your Green Future

The group was keen to explore the potential for a digital service to help workers and local residents visualise the types of careers that their area would need in the future, and identify how they themselves could play a part in that transition.

We built a prototype to test the following questions:

1. What is the most effective tone for a service like this – “Your job is in danger” or “Here’s a vision of a better future”?

2. Who would be best served by a service like this – dissatisfied workers, students, local councillors? And would local authorities, in particular, be interested in the data collected by a service like this?

3. Can a service like this induce realistic expectations in users, rather than presenting unachievable ‘ideal jobs’ that give false hope?

4. What are the most effective next steps for users to take? Switching job immediately is likely to be unfeasible for most. How can we get users one step closer to a greener career? What about users who don’t want to change job, but could support local transition in another way?

We quickly storyboarded and built a point-and-click prototype that would help us explore these questions, available at https://mysociety.github.io/your-green-future. A selection of screens from the prototype are included below.

After entering their postcode on the homepage, users are shown statistics about their area, including the workforce changes required to meet their local authority’s carbon goals. We mocked up a section that might show how your current job is expected to fare in the future, followed by a summary of the jobs that your area will need:
Links at the bottom lead the user through a quiz like the one on Green New Careers, to understand their skills and preferences, and to suggest a new career path that fits into the changes taking place in their area.

We then display a summary of the job, the salary and training requirements, and a testimonial to encourage people to consider this as a viable option:
Calls to action at the bottom of the page lead to the national careers advice service, and to contact your local councillor about green jobs / training support from your local authority.

We also prototyped a non-public page that would provide summary statistics about use of the site to local authorities, to help them identify demand in their area:
Prototype feedback

We were able to test the prototype with four target users during the prototyping week. This is fewer than we would have liked, and in particular we lacked input from a local authority or a union. The participants were:

- The Digital Innovation Manager at Power To Change
- A research fellow at the Alexander von Humboldt Institute, focusing on green jobs
- A social justice researcher and neurodiversity mentor
- A team leader at Connected Places Catapult

Their feedback helped us understand more about the questions we’d identified:

Audiences

In discussion with our participants, we identified a number of potential stakeholders who might be interested in a service like this:

- A local resident – the audience we’d designed it around
- Students, looking at training/career options that match their skills and ethics
- People with green job skills, looking to move to a new area where they’ll be required
- Employers – “to figure out where my new office should be”
- Local authorities, looking to attract green jobs/workers

One participant noted they would be interested in the jobs data and skills data that powers the site, in their role as a researcher. Others saw value in the data, more generically, as an indicator of the ‘prosperity’ of an area – one participant in particular likening it to “how estate agents look for nearby coffee shops versus fried chicken shops” in order to value properties.

A number of participants questioned whether people would realistically move to a new area for a greener job. It would perhaps be useful to explore this further in future – if it turns out that this is a common use-case, then we could build a service around that, allowing people to more easily search for new locations based on their current (green) job or skills. One participant wondered whether local authorities could “tempt” people into their area, by providing the best support for certain classes of green job. Perhaps in this case, a service built around advertising “the best place to be a heat pump installer”, say, might help those local authorities plug their skills gaps.

“First things first, I have no idea what a green job is and if it’s relevant to me.”

— User testing participant
A challenge that came up a number of times in the workshop sessions, and again in the testing, was over the definition of a “green job”. One participant quite rightly noted that carers, or medical professionals, might not typically be classed as a “green worker” but were nonetheless the sorts of careers a service on fair transition would want to expose.

Perhaps there is a better label out there for the sorts of jobs this week was about – “In a way”, said one participant, “you’ve got the definition of a green job on your homepage already: jobs that rise to the challenge and respond.”

**The role of local authorities**

Even though we didn’t have any testing participants from a local authority, a few attendees did have experience of the ways that local authorities are currently grappling with skills shortages in areas like retrofit and sustainable infrastructure.

One noted that a service like this could act as a good barometer, for cities, of what their populations want. “I think cities are behind the people on this,” they said, “people care more about sustainability than cities do.”

Another acknowledged that, since the onus is on employers to offer jobs and apprenticeships, it’s not clear how much local authorities could help to fill that gap. From what we heard during the week, there is probably room for improvement in the level of outreach from colleges to existing organisations, for example – and perhaps this kind of engagement could be encouraged by local authorities.

One participant commented, “Local authorities all have economic plans, have influence over the colleges in terms of training. They’ve got the levers that could help.” But another was sceptical of the influence council plans could have on fast-tracking green jobs and skills in the area:

“Scoring 0/5 on a Climate Action Plan vs what actually happens in a local authority area isn’t the same thing… I’m cynical about Climate Action Plans. Not sure I’d attribute lack of jobs to deficits in the Climate Action Plan.”

— User testing participant

Still, participants were generally positive on the idea that councils could get information out of the service – “The selling point for councils is helping to create a pipeline of new jobs, getting people engaged and interested,” one said. When shown the final ‘council dashboard’ page of the prototype, another participant with more direct experience of local authorities added: “This sort of data is very important, especially the time series aspect.”
It was suggested that local authorities would be particularly interested in data about unemployed users of the service, and what sorts of other roles they might be performing in their community—“like coaching football teams, taking their Nan to the grocer. That richer level of detail is interesting here.” A service which tried to record these activities might look very different to the one we prototyped during the week.

**Tone**

We spent a fair amount of time during the week worrying about the tone the service should take—from “Your job is in danger, switch now” at one end, to “Here’s a vision of a better future we can all have” at the other. Our prototype straddled the two— with a small section warning the user about the falling demand for their current job role (“flight attendant”), surrounded by mostly very positive wording around the scale and types of opportunities in their area.

Feedback from testing was that the positive tone worked quite well. “The final page is my favourite,” said one participant, “the quote, information, call to action for activism.” Nobody was worried about fear mongering in the “Your job” section of the page, but maybe that’s partly because it wasn’t really their job that was being described as at risk.

All of the participants understood the “visionary” role of the site fairly soon after seeing the results of entering their postcodes. When asked, one said:

> “It’s nudging… [it’s not a job site, it’s] more about information and inspiration.”

— User testing participant

**Realistic expectations**

A key area that we aimed to test in the prototype was the sort of content that would give users realistic expectations on their job prospects. The last thing we would want a service to do is present unachievable ‘ideal jobs’ that give false hope.

When they reached the page in the prototype that shows your recommended job (“retrofit coordinator!”) a couple of participants gave similar feedback, that highlighting the salary of the role might backfire in the case of many so-called “green jobs, because these jobs are often relatively under-paid. Both, instead, recommended we focus on the job security (which tallies with what we learned about the attitudes of job seekers in our background research) or on the social or environmental contributions that the job would help you make:
“Problem with lots of these “green jobs” is that they don’t necessarily pay you much money. Emphasise contributions you can make to nature, etc.”

— User testing participant

In general it feels like a service could be more transparent about the benefits (both financial, and otherwise) of these “green jobs” much earlier on in the user journey. One respondent, looking at the council page, asked about salaries and training opportunities. As it turns out, we had that information, but much later in the prototype – too late perhaps?

Another common thread in the feedback was the need for more information about the education and training requirements of jobs. “That’s what people fear most,” one participant said, “it would be off putting to be recommended a job, and then learn it’s a three year journey to get there.”

The most effective next steps

We asked user testing participants what they thought of the next steps presented at the end of the user journey.

One suggested that perhaps we should make it clearer that there are two potential paths: finding a new job to switch to, versus steps for mitigating the negative effects of the job that you do. Another respondent was particularly excited about this second option, enabling people to take climate action in their work life, without having to uproot their entire career:

“Green your current job’ is great! I assume that’d be all about mitigation.”

— User testing participant

A number of participants found the “0/5” wording about Climate Action Plans, on the final page, very confusing. This was an attempt to draw a link between the (lack of) green jobs/skills support available in an area, and the local authority’s poor performance in Climate Emergency UK’s Council Climate Plans Scorecards project. We hoped it might provoke users into contacting their local councillor, but one respondent felt it was too provocative, and perhaps unfair on local authorities. “It feels like there’s a balancing act,” they said, “between highlighting the shortcomings of local authorities, and recognising they don’t have much influence.”
Next steps

We set ourselves a massive challenge with this week’s theme—“fair transition”—and then found that, even after narrowing to transition in the world of work, there was still more complexity over the very concept of what constitutes a “green job”, and how the growth of these jobs is dependent on parallel action from central and local government, private enterprise, and educational institutions.

It feels like there is clearly value in matching users’ skills with potential jobs, and then matching those jobs with local authorities’ needs based on publicly available data.

With the launch of ASPECTT, Autonomy’s “multidimensional job database analysing skills, tasks, expertise, technologies and more”, expected late 2022, comes the promise of “the highest resolution image of what a just or green transition could look like at the level of jobs and industries.” A service inspired by our prototype could use and even enhance this analysis of possible fair transition trajectories by surfacing stated preferences from people in particular places.

This may also create the potential to model tailored, dynamic career pathways for individuals based on local authority climate action ambitions, and any number of other considerations, like training availability.

One next step could be to incorporate ASPECTT into the prototype and test it with people who may need to consider a change career in the near future, such as the flight attendant example used in our prototype.

Other next steps discussed by the team include:

- Doing more research into the assumption that people will move to attractive areas if green jobs are available. When is this decision made, and what are the contributing factors?
- Exploring the idea of a local authority/councillor-facing dashboard of jobs and skills (as opposed to an end-user service aimed directly at workers) that was suggested in the workshops at the start of the week, as a way of influencing local planning/policy.

If you’d like to help us answer any of these questions, or you’re interested in adopting the work we’ve done so far, and taking it in your own direction, please get in touch!

Otherwise, if you’re interested in updates on this project and many others from our Climate programme, subscribe to our newsletter.