



LOCALIS ANALYSIS

COP26: WHY LOCAL DELIVERY MATTERS

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1. Overview

Meeting the net zero target is one of the largest, most complex, and cross-cutting challenges that governments face. Many countries have committed to full decarbonisation of their economies by 2050. To do so, governments must organise their policies for the major delivery challenge of net zero, unprecedented in both scale and speed required.

Without a doubt, the UK has shown leadership on climate change and net zero. They established the first Climate Change Act, were the first country to write net zero into law and have the world's biggest share of offshore wind. The 2050 net zero target presents a significant increase in the level of ambition from the government's previous emissions reduction target, while the creation of Taskforce Net Zero as part of the Ten-Point Plan demonstrates a general willingness to improve public oversight of the UK green transition.

The challenge of reaching net zero firmly extends to local authorities who have a key role in supporting people, communities, and businesses through what must be a fair and just transition. Commitment to net zero runs throughout local government. Delivering over **800 services**, and democratically accountable to their residents with unparalleled insight into local communities, their circumstances and their convening power. Across the country, local authorities have made resounding commitments signalling clear intent through over 300 climate emergency declarations. Most of those have also committed to reaching net zero ahead of the government's 2050 target. They are an indispensable partner for national government in reaching the UK's legislative 2050 net zero target – something that must be highlighted during and following COP26 in November.

After months of delay, the net zero strategy was finally published, **two weeks before COP26**. Deemed to be "achievable and affordable" by the Committee on Climate Change, the plan is **the most comprehensive of the G20** and offers a genuine path to net zero. Until now, the absence of a coherent national strategy to align agendas from national to the local level to enable and resource action on climate change has led to the belief that other countries could do with seeing 'proper leadership' from the UK before the conference. The strategy has, in the nick of time, strengthened the position of the UK officiating the COP26 summit.

Described as the "last, best opportunity...and the best hope" for the planet, COP26 is a crucial opportunity to get the world's climate action **back on track**. Hosted in Glasgow, the two-week event puts the UK climate policies firmly in the spotlight and applies pressure to the UK government to show leadership in driving climate action, decarbonisation, and net zero delivery. Success will be determined by multilateral and inclusive negotiations, a step up in national ambition, and delivery of net zero and climate action on the ground. "COP is for ordinary people" and therefore a key issue on the agenda will be how to ensure that the decarbonisation process to reach net zero is a just transition that is fair for all.

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The world has seen many transitions in the past which have led to job losses and economic hardship, creating a fear that future transitions will be similarly painful. By ensuring that the people most affected by national and global decisions are considered, a just transition seeks to ensure that the substantial benefits of a green economy transition are shared widely, while also supporting those who stand to lose economically from the transition.

The Committee on Climate Change has identified the need for a just transition in the UK to ensure that the burdens and benefits of building a net zero society are allocated fairly. Most emissions reductions milestones across Whitehall have gone unmet in the last two years and nothing has yet emerged that explicitly confronts delivering a just transition in any capacity.

At COP26, the UK is positioned to advance just transitions and going forward, the UK Government must show leadership on how the country can navigate to a net-zero economy in a socially just manner. Working with the challenges people face today, a just transition is hugely important to avoid any political backlash. Complex issues must be addressed such as poverty, inclusion, racism and all other drivers of exclusion that undermine the ability to bring about the kind of change needed at the scale and pace required to operate inside the climate change limits.

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2. The context: a just transition

The now inevitable need to change from fossil fuel dominated global, national, and regional energy sectors to ones that are decarbonised and driven by renewable and sustainable sources is often being supplemented with calls for a 'just transition' in affected communities. Put broadly, a 'just transition' would see this decarbonisation process happen without the jobs and livelihoods of places and people being put at risk and would strive to tackle the inequality and injustices of how our energy systems are currently set up. More specifically, those who currently earn their living in the fossil fuel industry, and the places that depend upon those industries to be economically viable, need to be assured that the policies designed to expedite the decarbonisation process will not threaten their incomes and local economies.

There are [four identified ways](#) in which employment will be affected by the reorientation of economies toward decarbonisation and greater sustainability:

- 1. Job creation:** The expansion of investment into more sustainable energy sources and low carbon intensive enterprise will see demand for labour rise in several, diverse sectors of the economy such as manufacturing, transportation, construction and the operation of new green technologies.
- 2. Job substitution:** As a result of large-scale shifts in the economy happening within an expedited time frame, some jobs will be substituted with more efficient, lower carbon alternatives, from fossil fuels to renewables for example.
- 3. Job elimination:** Unfortunately, through either being phased out or rapidly cut without planned replacement, some jobs in industries dependent on pollution or that are unacceptably inefficient will be eliminated.
- 4. Job transformation:** Finally, what will hopefully be most existing workers (depending on how carefully the transition is managed and the guiding principles at play) will find that their jobs will be transformed and redefined as many workplace practices, skill sets, and job profiles will be successfully greened.

Perhaps the most important, major opportunity is the [potential for huge net gains in total employment](#). This first point is of particular importance as there is a constantly expanding consensus that transitioning to greener economies can act as a strong driver of 'job creation, social justice and poverty'. For instance, jobs created in wind and solar industries alone would be enough to replace those jobs lost by phasing out fossil fuels, at all occupational levels. This demonstrates the extent to which a transition to a greener economy that is managed well, and with the concept of a 'just transition' as its driving force, has very positive employment potential. There are also major opportunities to improve job quality, practice social inclusion, raise incomes, and bring about a more efficient and productive workforce by enacting a policy agenda that understands and is sympathetic to the colossal social and economic challenges that the global transition to a green economy will cause.

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'Just transition', at its core, is a sympathetic and public-spirited way of framing an approach to climate policy. By applying justice to areas of climate, energy, and environmental policy, just transition discourse demands that any process of decarbonisation aims to address the inequalities and injustices of the system as it stands, not aggravate them or entrench them further. This is important because more often than not, the rhetoric of governments and corporations surrounding climate policy can be blunt and sombre.

2.1 Just transition policy

There are two key policy areas of a just transition: coordination and green skills.

Coordination

For the most part, this takes the form of a macroeconomic agenda where the promotion of sustainable production, decent work for all and the respect for the green division of labour is the driving force behind increased productivity and growth. It is only by providing 'legislative and regulatory certainty' undergirded by the assertion of the rule of law that environmental and social sustainability can be worked towards while still laying the groundwork for long-term competitiveness, economic growth, social cohesion and high-quality employment.

Green skills

The amount and range of new jobs or the extent to which jobs will be transformed as the result of clean energy investment and global decarbonisation will potentially require mass job retraining and reskilling of the workforce to be able to work in green industry. To achieve this, upskilling and skills development courses will be required, facilitated by a process of close collaboration between workers and employers to identify where there is most need for skills training. This should inform proposals for government organisation, to inform more concrete, larger-scale training programmes.

There are no 'one size fits all' approach, but policies must be contextualised and designed in line with varying factors (such as skills sets, industry dependency, social cohesion, etc.). Prioritising inclusive stakeholder engagement can play an important role in whether policy initiatives enjoy public backing or backlash. So long as a policy programme is formulated as a result of collaboration, consultation and dialogue across sectors, institutions, other governmental bodies and community groups and is driven by the principles of a just transition, then it should see opportunities maximised, challenges successfully mitigated, and local, national and global injustices addressed.

The context of a just transition is vital to understanding how local delivery impacts global chances of hitting climate targets. It must be a 'golden thread' through all national policy, and must be considered as a major factor in the determination of how the local state can best deliver on climate change mitigation and adaptation.

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3. The argument: a call for local action and representation

With warnings of intensifying climate change and inadequate global response, COP26 has been determined as a final chance to tackle the climate crisis. Held in Glasgow, the UK government is positioned to show strengthened leadership after the release of their delayed net zero strategy. The lack, until very recently, of a national strategy has resulted in the crucial role that local government will play in delivering national net zero goals being overlooked amidst the COP26 discourse. Hosted on home turf, COP26 presents an opportunity to change this.

3.1 A shift in perspective from macro to micro

Understandably, the discourse surrounding COP26 has focused on the global need for a seismic shift in the way countries around the world tackle the climate crisis. A leading focus ahead of the conference has been on meeting obligations to hold global temperatures to below 2C above pre-industrial levels, while making efforts to limit heating to 1.5C, as agreed in the Paris agreement. In this context, going into COP26 all countries across the world are being asked to revise their nationally determined targets to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 to be in line with a 1.5C target. All of this being done as a precursor to reaching net zero emissions by 2050.

However, recent UN reporting has given a dire warning that the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) being submitted by global actors such as the US, EU and UK [fall short](#). For this reason, there is significant expectation pinned on COP26 as a final moment to take decisive action in combatting the climate crisis on a global scale. This high hope for the conference was encapsulated by U.S climate envoy John Kerry [when he stated](#) 'Glasgow is the last, best opportunity that we have and the best hope that the world will come together and build on Paris'.

With such hope riding on the conference, on the national level the UK government finds itself in a position to take charge in defining the global response to the climate crisis. Without a doubt, the UK has shown leadership on climate change. They established the first Climate Change Act, were the first country to write net zero into law and have the world's biggest share of offshore wind with a power sector that has all but phased out coal. The government has in the last two years published its Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution, and new strategies on buildings, energy, transport, and infrastructure. Yet these policies have not been judged to meet the scale of the challenge.

It [has been noted](#) that a clear and defined strategy for the conference has been lacking. In the build up to COP26, it was announced by government that a net zero strategy would be published entailing a roadmap that details how to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

After months of delay, the [strategy was published](#) two weeks before the conference. This delay has led to the belief that other countries could do with seeing '[proper leadership](#)' from the UK before the conference. At the same time, the lack of concrete plans going into COP26 has led to UK businesses [co-signing a letter](#) highlighting how the government has a limited window to show decisive leadership

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climate issues. Particularly given that, while government has laid out ambitious plans through documents such as the Ten Point Plan, substantive policies that would enable these plans to be reached are yet to materialise.

The new net zero strategy has been described as a “genuine step forward”, with a dedicated section on Local Climate Action. To support all local government in developing and delivering their net zero delivery plans, the government says it needs to act in three key areas:

- 1. Setting clearer expectations** at the local level, clarifying how the partnership with local government should work and considering how decarbonisation action at national, regional, local and community levels fit together and the wider benefits a just transition brings.
- 2. Providing resources** at the local level, allowing local government to deliver stronger contributions to national net zero targets.
- 3. Building capacity and capability** at the local level to support ambition and provide support in areas lacking in net zero progress.

But a lack of coherent national strategy until now has had undesirable consequences on local government. And there are concerns that the new net zero strategy is simply a rehash of existing disjointed policy interventions. It presents no indication that the government actually has a joined-up strategy and coherent set of expectations about the [transformative role](#) of local authorities.

This is especially pertinent given the key role that action at the local level will play in delivering global COP26 and national net zero goals. This crucial role of the local state in combating the climate crisis has been overlooked amidst the discourse surrounding COP26, which has almost entirely focused on the global and national levels. While this supranational focus has made it difficult to highlight the role of local government in the fight against the climate crisis, it has been argued that the UK's hosting of COP26 presents an opportunity to change this. Particularly, to focus on [‘how local government level changes \[and actions\] can contribute to a global response’](#).

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3.2 Global strategy, national policy, local delivery

The vital role of local governments and the urgent need to actualise action on the local level cannot be ignored if national and, indeed, global net zero targets are to be met. With no overall plan for how English local authorities fit into delivering national net zero ambitions, local government have been calling for increased multi-level collaboration in delivering on COP26 ambitions through a local pathway to net zero, 'Road to COP26', echoed by the Committee on Climate Change. A motion was passed at the LGA General Assembly in 2021 calling on the government to ensure proper representation of local government at COP26. The successful motion highlights the contribution and leadership of local councils in decarbonisation and the unique power of municipalities in interacting with society to actualise climate commitments.

Undoubtedly, COP26 presents an opportunity to highlight the crucial role of the local state. Given the wide ranging and enormous ambitions being pledged on the global level to tackle the climate crisis, this crucial role, and the urgent need to actualise action on the local level, cannot be ignored anymore. Implementation of the new national net zero strategy will be a huge task; for these ambitions and the associated actions needed to mean anything for communities across the UK and the world, they need to be explained at the local level. It is within this context that COP26 is a vital opportunity to place the importance of local government in fighting the climate crisis on the global spotlight.

Internationally, this is something that has been recognised by a number of stakeholders. The Local Governments and Municipal Authorities (LGMA) constituency is the main alliance representing local government at the UNFCCC since the first COP in 1995. Following the conclusion of COP25 in Madrid, [they called for](#) a 'Multilevel Action COP26', whilst unveiling a roadmap to Glasgow. Owing to a perceived disappointing final result from COP25, the LGMA constituency [highlighted the need](#) for increased climate ambition and action by national governments, a part of which would include full engagement with local governments in preparing second NDC's ahead of COP26 .

Full engagement with local government is seen as particularly important given how multilevel and collaborative climate action will become the new normal across countries in the era of the Paris Agreement. All levels of government must work, therefore, if we are to attain net zero by 2050. As part of its 'Multilevel Action COP26' initiative, six key priorities were set out by the LGMA constituency to better help enable national and local government collaboration in developing the second NDC's. These include:

1. Raising the climate ambition of local and regional governments.
2. Ensuring vertical integration and transparency of nationally determined contributions.
3. Localising climate finance.
4. Taking a balanced approach to migration and adaptation.
5. Linking climate to circular economy and nature.
6. Amplifying global climate action.

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These priorities echo efforts of local government in the UK in calling for increased collaboration in delivering on COP26 ambitions and tackling the climate crisis. As part of efforts to promote this, the LGA developed a '[Road to COP26](#)', with three fundamental asks of the UK COP Presidency.

The first includes having a dedicated local government day at the conference, which is scheduled for 11 November. The second is for formal representation of local government at the conference. Particularly, a dedicated chapter covering subnational government in the official agreement reached at the end of COP26. A key part of this is ensuring that local government is empowered both politically and financially to play its part in meeting COP26 ambitions. This relates to the third ask, which calls for a full commitment to empower local government as part of the updated NDC's.

The '[Road to COP26](#)' has been produced as part of the LGA's wider [local pathway to net zero](#) that highlights the fundamental role of local authorities in tackling the climate crisis. In preparation for COP26, the local pathway to net zero has been developed by bringing together councils, partners, and industry experts to share perspectives on the best way to harness local climate action. In particular, it has been themed around the goals of the conference, which have been defined by the President of COP26 as mitigation, adaptation, finance, and collaboration.

There are multiple examples of English local authorities taking this approach. Oxford City Council has been highlighted as introducing the country's first zero emission zone in order to move toward zero emission travel in the city. With regard to adaptation action, Leeds City Council has been showcased for its work in creating the largest flood alleviation scheme in the country. In terms of finance and investing in clean growth, Swindon Borough Council's introduction of solar farms to boost access to renewable energy is an example of community investment, especially as profits generated are invested in the local community. In terms of collaboration, the Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames has worked with local residents through a scything workshop to engage with them on the local natural environment. This demonstrates the power of collaboration across levels of government and communities to address climate change at the level of place.

The motion, proposed by the leader of Brighton & Hove City Council, was advanced in order to highlight the substantial 'contribution, leadership, and efforts of local council in reducing toxic carbon emissions across the UK'. At the same time, the motion serves as an opportunity to emphasise how action taken on the local level to tackle climate change is underpinned by the principles of good growth. Particularly when faced with COVID-19 recovery, to ensure that the need for both are taken together in a way that benefits all in the community equally. Following the passing of the motion at the General Assembly, the official spokesperson for COP26 addressed the LGA conference confirming that an official day has been set aside in the summit [devoted to local government](#) across the world. In making the announcement, there was acknowledgement of the power of municipalities in interacting with society more often than central government, therefore placing them in a unique position to actualise the commitments reached on the global level at COP26

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3.3 *The unique importance of local authorities*

The local authority is the first point of contact citizens have with their government, and it is at this level that wider national and strategic objectives, such as net zero targets, can first be seen in motion. From citizens' assemblies to climate emergency declarations, to local climate action plans, local authorities are presenting place-specific contributions towards achieving the national net zero target. Coupled with varying levers and strategic partnerships with local stakeholders, local authorities can take a decisive leadership role in finding place-based solutions to both net zero and a green COVID-19 recovery.

Local authorities are **essential** to meet the national net zero target. Delivering over 800 services, and democratically accountable to their residents with unparalleled insight into local communities and circumstance and their convening power, they are the best placed to devise place-specific net zero aligned solutions. Indeed, they are doing so. It is estimated that since 2018, 91 percent of local authorities in England have **officially adopted** at least one new or updated commitment with the aim of reducing emissions at least as quickly as the national net zero 2050 target. And more than a third (38 percent) of single and upper tier authorities have committed to decarbonise their local area by or before 2030.

Oxford City Council was the first to hold a citizens' assembly on climate change, which brought together local residents to explore different options to cut carbon emissions within the city. It followed on from the city council declaring a climate emergency and resulted in a report outlining several key findings that the council acted on. One such action involved a commitment to raising energy efficiency standards of new homes, boosting renewable energy installations across Oxford, and moving toward a zero-carbon building system in council owned properties.

Yet, regulation set at the national level can at times prove to be a restriction on the extent to which action can be taken on the local level. Localis has **previously highlighted** how setting the Future Homes Standard 2025 as a national minimum building standard impedes Oxford City Council's ability to act at pace in reaching net zero city wide by 2040, ten years ahead of the national target. Recognising the fundamental role of local delivery to achieving nationwide targets requires flexibility in central local relations that allow localities to act with full determination. And in the case of decarbonising the nation's new and existing building stock, this means setting standards as local, as opposed to national, minimums.

The need for local nuance is particularly important given the varying levers available at the local level to prepare places for climate change. These are wide-ranging and include planning powers over buildings and transport, the responsibility to protect the local environment and wildlife, and duties over waste disposal.

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These levers available to local authorities also allow them to take a decisive leadership role in finding solutions appropriate to place circumstance. Working alongside local state stakeholders through strategic partnerships, local authorities find themselves at the heart of the climate conversation occurring in their localities. As already touched upon, a lot of the measures required to be undertaken for net zero will take on a significant local dimension, whether this be retrofitting building stock, decarbonising transport, or cutting emissions from agriculture. This reiterates the point that while global direction and national policy support is required to guide the desired direction, how climate action manifests on the ground will depend and differ based on place circumstance. This is something that should be encouraged and nurtured.

The power of local delivery in the fight against climate change also has the potential to heavily boost and uplift local labour markets faced with the need for a green recovery from COVID-19. Faced with the ever-growing need for green skills relating to Modern Methods of Construction, retrofitting, or heat-pump installation, local action on these aspects of climate change could create a pipeline of projects that could better facilitate training and upskilling for these new jobs. If done right, in strategic coordination with key stakeholders of the local state, there is vast potential to deliver a holistic green recovery from the pandemic that can aid in a just transition of the local labour market whilst moving at pace to decarbonise the economy.

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4. The way forward: realising a whole systems approach

The UK government cannot achieve its net zero targets without local authorities. Nationally the government has shown leadership on climate change but, until very recently, was lacking in net zero direction. The new net zero strategy is the most comprehensive of the G20 and recognises the importance of local government in delivering net zero. However, there is still an absence of the provision of resources, powers and capacity for local leaders to propel big place-based changes. Until a consistent, cross-sector policy and financial framework for local authorities to progress towards net zero is established, they will continue to find themselves in an equivocal position as to where they fit into a cohesive national picture.

Local authorities should be the cornerstone for delivery of Net Zero in local communities and are an [indispensable partner](#) in reaching the UK's legislative 2050 net zero target. Commitment to net zero runs throughout local government. The new Net Zero Strategy has been deemed "[achievable and affordable](#)" by the Committee on Climate Change, the plan is the most comprehensive of the G20 and offers a genuine path to net zero. The strategy recognises the importance of local government in delivering net zero and through the Local Net Zero Forum will be enable councils to work with Government to reduce carbon emissions in all places. Across the country, local authorities have made resounding commitments and partnerships, signalling clear intent through over 300 climate emergency declarations. Most of those have also committed to reaching net zero [ahead of the government's 2050 target](#).

However, while undoubtedly worthy of celebration, this is only the tip of the iceberg and diverts attention from the reality facing local leaders – a lack of resources to enable local action on climate change, insufficient powers to propel big changes, and insufficient capacity to resolutely use existing powers, exacerbated by delayed national strategy. The problem with delivering net zero is lack of coordination, both within the national government and between national and local level, and reduced capacity at local level. It is clear that the UK government has failed to provide local leaders with the powers and resources to effectively deliver and is thus embedding a system that is structurally incapable of delivering net zero.

4.1 The problem of piecemeal coordination

There is a lack of collaboration and coordination between central and local government and indeed, within national government departments. While there is now a net zero strategy, there are still concerns regarding contradictory policies and fragmented funding streams that dilute delivery powers of local authorities and undermine efforts for place-based integrated action on delivering net zero. To combat this, the strategy announced plans for a new local net zero forum chaired by Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) to enhance central-local collaboration and to set "clearer expectations" and "provide a single engagement route into HM government in a coordinated and coherent way".

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Reducing emissions to achieve net zero will require changes unprecedented in overall scale. As such, as reported in a [National Audit Office \(NAO\) review](#), meeting the net zero target is one of largest, most complex and cross-cutting challenges that the government faces. All sectors of the UK economy will need to consider how to decarbonise, requiring changes that will impact everyone, from the way people travel, to how buildings are heated, to how land is used. Thus, achieving net zero links to the government's wider objectives, such as "levelling up" and ensuring a "green recovery" from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Until the recent publication of the net zero strategy, local authorities had found themselves in an equivocal position as to where they fit into a cohesive national picture. This left local authorities with the onus of establishing their own pathway to net zero based on [piecemeal policy and communications](#) from government. Central government had failed to establish how it would collaborate with local authorities to clarify net zero responsibilities, but has finally outlined this at national, regional, and local level in the net zero strategy. The [Local Government Association wrote](#) that the government needed to outline national and local government responsibilities and commit to working with local government bodies to deliver net zero. They professed the need for an engagement process between central and local government to support councils to develop local net zero delivery plans and invest in green solutions. Government communications directly relating to local authorities on net zero are generally from specific government departments on narrow policy areas and information available through narrow sector specific datasets. Aside from the BEIS local area emissions data, a consolidated picture is not provided.

Local authorities have raised the issue of lack of coordination across government due to departments' different requirements. This is due to separate and different arrangements of each department in liaising with local authorities on net zero issues and is further complicated where net zero implications cut across several departments. For instance, BEIS, DfT, and Defra all have an interest in planning considerations for new housing. Additionally, communication is often perceived as being one-way, with local authorities frequently responding to consultations, without much feedback on government's plans.

To improve central government coordination and engagement with local authorities on reaching net zero, in April 2020, the then MHCLG created a cross-departmental local government policy group on climate change mitigation and adaptation. The group [discussed proposals for climate change officers in local authorities](#), to feed into a local climate action taskforce via a regional representative. Due to the pandemic, these proposals were paused with the taskforce put on hold. But the pandemic brought to the fore the importance of local authority delivery and how government engages with local authorities, stimulating wider discussions. As a result, the government has promised to "set clearer expectations" for how it will work with councils to reach net zero emissions, and explore how it can streamline funds that support this.

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The net zero strategy attempts to tackle this issue; [plans for a new local net zero forum](#) chaired by the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy were announced to enhance central-local collaboration. The cross-departmental group will regularly bring together senior officials from national and local government to discuss net zero policy and, most importantly, delivery. This [comes with the promise](#) to “set clearer expectations” and “clearer delivery roles for local government and provide a single engagement route into HM government in a coordinated and coherent way”. Whether this will work in practice remains to be seen, but the recognition of local government importance is a step forward in taking a whole systems approach to net zero.

4.2 Local authority powers and barriers

Place-shaping powers and actions potentially influence around a third of UK emissions. However, the Committee on Climate Change states that the levers and powers local authorities possess are “unlikely to be sufficient to deliver local authorities’ Net Zero ambitions, due to gaps in powers, policy and funding barriers at local level.” Local authorities need a supporting ecosystem to enable power to act, alongside some essential powers defined in legislation. Spending and procurement are the biggest powers available to local authorities.

Advocacy from local authorities consistently emphasizes the need for more local authority powers to enable action to progress at pace and scale. Empowering local authorities is not simply ‘nice to have’, but essential to delivering long-term, sustainable emissions reductions for local places. With recognition of the vital role local authorities will play in achieving emissions reductions and meeting the national net zero target, in the past year national bodies have refocused their attention on climate change at the local level. In doing so, the deficiencies in local authority power and the impact on net zero delivery have been brought to light. In the Committee on Climate Change’s report [Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget](#), the CCC outlines the powers and levers local authorities possess to deliver emissions cuts. It states that “these levers alone are unlikely to be sufficient to deliver local authorities’ Net Zero ambitions, due to gaps in powers, policy and funding barriers at a local level.” Bearing in mind that over half of the emissions cuts require local-level decisions, the report found that the Sixth Carbon Budget, and therefore net zero, can only be achieved if Government, regional agencies, and local authorities work together and in doing so, empower local authorities with flexibility, finance, and coherent policy and powers.

Place-shaping powers and actions potentially influence around a third of UK emissions and contribute to reaching net zero in key sectors, which are:

- 1. Transport.** ‘Greening’ transport is key to net zero and local authorities have some powers in this space - although councils sit within a complex set of powers across different players.
- 2. Buildings.** Planning policy and enforcement is paramount for net zero buildings, particularly for retrofit and heat decarbonisation

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- 3. Energy.** Council powers over the energy sector exist through both planning policy and infrastructure investment.
- 4. Waste.** Local authorities have responsibility for waste management (although they have limited influencing powers over waste generation).

Depending on the policies and resources available to influence these sectors, the net zero transition will either accelerate or slow. But how much local authorities can and cannot do is determined by the legal framework of duties, powers, and policies. The General Power of Competence is primary legislation that provides powers and underpins many local authorities' activities to tackle emissions, while duties are a legal obligation, the things they have to do or ensure. Even where councils have duties to act, the process of applying powers can be complex, time consuming and costly, and lack of resources often lead to a failure of enforcement action. The duties and powers can therefore be an obstacle to a whole-systems approach to carbon reduction.

It should be noted that there is a difference between "powers" as defined in legislation and "power" to implement actions. The latter rests on the combination of powers, political will, public and policy support, finance, capacity, removal of barriers, and determination and persistence. When local authorities ask for more powers to deliver net zero, what is most needed is a supporting ecosystem to enable "power" to act, alongside some essential "powers". There is no one big power, lever, or partnership for local authorities to deliver net zero. A full suite of local powers needs to be optimised and utilised collectively. But even then, they are not sufficient to deliver local authority net zero ambitions due to current gaps in key powers, policy, funding, skills and capacity barriers. Unless this changes, the local and national transition to net zero will be slow and unsuccessful.

The government does not believe a new statutory net zero requirement is needed for councils, [saying](#) it would be difficult for this to reflect "the diversity of barriers and opportunities local places experiences." However, this absence of statutory responsibility presents the risk that local authority action towards net zero is not as extensive as it needs to be.

Spending

The ability of local authorities to work towards decarbonisation and net zero and net zero requires substantial sums of money, funds for investment which most local authorities lack. Finance is the biggest barrier and as such the main casualty is capacity. The knock-on effect is reduced power to drive down emissions through their spending. The funding issues facing local authorities are complex and multiple: lack of funding resulting in less power; numerous funding streams that may or may not bypass local authorities but still affect the local area; fragmented funding streams that do not incorporate net zero requirements; and short-termism in climate specific funds.

Local authorities have seen a [real terms reduction in spending power](#) of 28.6 percent between 2010-11 and 2017-18, while demand in key services areas has also increased. Unlike central government

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and businesses, local authorities cannot borrow to finance day-to-day spending and must seek to balance their budgets, leaning on their three main sources of revenue: government grants; council tax; and business rates. In 2017-18, among single tier and county councils, **61.8 percent** overspent on their service budgets. Upper tier councils would effectively have to raise council tax by 4.99 percent every year to **ineffectively plug the holes in their budget**.

Unsurprisingly, the biggest barrier to reaching net zero is finance and as such, the **main casualty of austerity** has been capacity. Often deprived of the ability to spearhead initiatives and implement broader plans, local government has been brought closer and closer to being simply a service delivery branch of central government. This creates a particular problem for councils, as their means to deliver core services have been restricted along with their broader capacity to govern. Councils see themselves as charged by national government with delivering a full range of local services, but under a set of constraints which drive down the quality – and then taking the localised blame.

With less money, there is less power. Local government in England has very limited revenue-raising powers compared with other developed countries. So even though they have formal spending powers, local authorities hold less ability to drive down emissions through their spending. This is particularly the case for lower carbon technologies with higher capital costs than more carbon intensive ones - for example, in upgrading or maintaining building stock. Unable to effectively balance their budgets, it makes prioritising climate change and emissions reduction seem expensive.

One area where power is deficient for local authorities is the ability to align all spending trickling down from government with the broader plan for net zero in a local area. Spending reaches a local area through a variety of routes; via direct grants from Whitehall departments to cash pots such as the Local Growth Fund. These and other funding streams can bypass the local authority straight to LEPs, who are much less accountable for their spending than local authorities. For some funding, such as from the Shared Prosperity Fund, it is unclear where it will be routed. And then some new funding will be more directly available to local authorities post-Brexit and post-Covid, such as the Levelling Up Fund, but whether this will require a funding match against net zero has not been indicated. Similarly, the UK Community Renewal Fund offers support for pilot programmes but does not require these to demonstrate a contribution to net zero and wider environmental objectives.

Additionally, funding to support climate change actions is often competitive and short-term. Local authorities are on the end of the bid and fail, bid and success relationship with national government which doesn't allow them to plan effectively. To embed net zero, councils need 10 – 20-year plans to reconceptualise, replan and rebuild cities and local areas so that they are decarbonised and inclusive. A **damning report** published in October 2021 by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, notes that the new Net Zero Strategy includes no clear commitment to increasing the level of long-term funding specifically for local authority climate action. The responsibilities on local authorities to deliver local net zero in a just and equitable way are increasing. Local authorities are

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a ready and willing partner for the government, but they cannot “decarbonise on a shoestring”. To realise their potential in this space, this needs to be matched by devolution of fiscal policy. COP26 provides the ideal opportunity to reset the dial and focus on local authorities across the UK.

Procurement

Procurement is a key power for local authorities to deliver net zero ensuring best value and social value. While procurement can be complex and needs to be done carefully, if climate action is integrated with community wealth building approaches, there are opportunities for innovation and large emissions savings to be had. Procurement is a key power that local authorities can use to deliver net zero, entering contracts for assets or services to deliver their statutory functions. Larger contracts and purchases are particularly powerful as they have a duty to deliver best value and social value – local authorities are accountable to their communities for how they spend their money and for ensuring that spending is value for money.

Procured goods and services can make up 70-80 percent of a council’s total carbon footprint due to the use of contractors for waste collection, construction, social services, and facilities management. But used well, procurement is a strong lever for local authorities that can drive down or lock-out emissions while supporting growth and innovation in supply chains. It has been seen as a way to support the low-carbon net zero transition and support the development of supply chains in the low carbon economic goods and services sector.

Local authorities have been identifying opportunities for innovation in procurement through integrating climate action with community wealth building approaches. Examples would be through local food networks, community renewable energy schemes on social housing, and through creating smaller procurement lots for efficiency works to enable local suppliers to bid for contracts. However, procurement is complex and large emissions savings projects must be carefully procured and require early scoping, careful specification, key performance indicators and robust contract management. In the face of reduced capacity and insufficient resources in procurement teams, the challenge for increasing low-carbon procurement looms large and persistent.

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4.3 Place-based partnerships for a just transition

Local authorities have a fundamental role as place-based conveners and partnership builders to tackle net zero in their local area. Highly trusted, local authorities have a singular relationship with local workforces. This knowledge and trust puts them in a prime position to identify carbon intensive industries and businesses and provide support through the transition to greener practices, upskill and reskill workers, grow the low carbon jobs market and reduce inequality and poverty.

As local leaders, partnership builders and coordinators, local authorities have a fundamental role in bringing together all sectors of society – business, academic, public, community and voluntary sectors – to combat climate change in their local area. With their close relationships, local authorities can target decarbonisation policies towards those who will benefit the most from transitioning to low carbon technologies and lifestyles.

Local authorities are paramount in enabling and delivering local economic benefit through bringing together colleges, training providers, key employers, and potential workers. This role is vital in delivering both resilient growth and importantly, a just transition to net zero that meets the needs of the local community. In the wake of the pandemic, this holds particular significance where reskilling the workforce for a green, low carbon economy will reduce unemployment in areas hit hardest by the pandemic. It has been estimated that there could be nearly 700,000 direct total jobs in England's low-carbon and renewable energy economy by 2030 and more than 1.2m by 2050, generated across England's local authorities .

Of course, with everything, additional funding and capacity will be needed to enable local areas to capitalise on net zero transitional job opportunities. But despite local authorities struggling with balancing large funding cuts with the need for local net zero, it must be recognised by local government and all relevant stakeholders that many of the solutions provide collateral benefits. For example, the rapid rollout of electric vehicle charging points will help reduce carbon emissions and therefore air pollution, and will also be a driver of green jobs, helping to stimulate the economy.

If prime minister Boris Johnson truly intends for the UK to 'serve as a launchpad for a global green industrial revolution', his government must show leadership at COP26 and beyond on how it will navigate to a net-zero economy in a socially just manner. And this will require not just putting place but empowering place, people and communities, at the very heart of net zero policy-making.