

# Environmental Audit Committee

## Oral evidence: Mapping the path to net zero, HC 497

Wednesday 8 September 2021

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dr Matthew Offord (in the Chair); Duncan Baker; Mr Robert Goodwill; Helen Hayes; Caroline Lucas; Cherilyn Mackrory; Jerome Mayhew; Claudia Webbe.

In the absence of the Chair, Dr Matthew Offord was called to the Chair.

Questions 65 - 107

### Witnesses

**I:** Councillor Rachel Blake, Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board, Local Government Association; Councillor Claire Holland, Vice-Chair, Transport and Environment Committee, London Councils; Carolyn McKenzie, Chair, Energy and Clean Growth Working Group, ADEPT; Councillor Richard Clewer, Chair, Countryside Climate Network, UK100; and Polly Billington, Chief Executive Officer, UK100.

**II:** Dr Sally Barnard, Coordinator, South East Climate Alliance; and Geoff Barnard, Communications Lead, South East Climate Alliance.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Local Government Association](#)

[ADEPT](#)

[UK100](#)

[South East Climate Alliance](#)



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Councillor Rachel Blake, Councillor Claire Holland, Carolyn McKenzie, Councillor Richard Clewer and Polly Billington.

Q65 **Chair:** This is the first Environmental Audit Select Committee meeting in person this year, and I think that we are all very pleased to be back here. Our evidence session today is Mapping the path to net zero: Local government and net zero in England.

Before we start, I will ask members of the Committee if they have any declarations of interest. I will start by saying that I did work for the Local Government Association many years ago and, secondly, I worked with Polly Billington while I was at the BBC, just for clarification, though I do not think that any of those interests have any effect upon the inquiry today. Do any members have any other declarations?

**Helen Hayes:** I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association. I employ a councillor in my staff team, and I should mention that Claire Holland is council leader in part of my constituency in her role as leader of Lambeth Council and is, therefore, known to me.

**Chair:** We have two panels this afternoon. The first are representatives of local government organisations involved in local government leadership on net zero issues. At the political level, we have the Local Government Association, London Councils and UK100. At an official level, we have the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport. Councils in metropolitan and rural areas are both represented this afternoon.

Could I ask each of our participants if they would like to introduce themselves? I will ask the two members who are here in person and then I will ask the three who are appearing by Zoom. Councillor Holland, would you like to start, please?

**Councillor Holland:** I am leader of Lambeth Council, but today I appear in my capacity as vice-chair of the Transport and Environment Committee at London Councils. London Councils represents the 32 London boroughs in the city of London, and we are a cross-party organisation collaborating together without reference to political persuasion, Chair.

**Polly Billington:** It is nice to see you, Matthew. In terms of declaring an interest, I am also a councillor in Hackney, but today I am here as the chief executive of UK100, which is a network of local authority leaders who have made a commitment to act ambitiously on climate, specifically initially to shift to 100% clean energy across their whole assets. More than two thirds of our members have committed to a net zero pledge across their whole assets by 2030 and across their communities by 2045.

**Councillor Blake:** Good afternoon. I am deputy mayor in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, representing the Local Government Association.



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**Carolyn McKenzie:** I am the director for environment at Surrey County Council. I also sit on the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport Environment Board and I chair their clean growth working group, and it is that group that I am representing today.

**Councillor Clewer:** I am the leader of Wiltshire Council. I also chair the Countryside Climate Network, a subgroup of UK100 representing rural authorities.

Q66 **Chair:** Thank you for appearing this afternoon. Your time is greatly appreciated. As you know, we are undertaking an inquiry and we are particularly keen to hear your views and any evidence you have that can inform our inquiry.

I would like to start with Ms Blake. You have called for a national framework to address the climate emergency. Why do you think that this is necessary and how do you envisage that this might operate?

**Councillor Blake:** The situation at the moment is that we have several Government Departments with a lead role on this. We have BEIS with the overarching commitment on net zero. We have MHCLG looking at the buildings and communities and local government functions. We then, of course, have the Department for Transport, which is working on the decarbonisation strategy. We think that we need a framework that can bring together all of those functions so that we can be clear about the different roles and responsibilities.

Local authorities across the country are ready to step up and be partners with national Government in order to deliver on net zero. We are place shapers. We can convene with our citizens and our communities. We are delivery agents. We have local spending power and understanding of our local supply chain. Of course, we are also owners of our assets. The NAO report that this Committee commissioned in order to understand those relationships acknowledged that there was a lack of clarity around determining the role of local authorities. We think that the framework that we are proposing will create a place for different roles and responsibilities to be clarified so that everybody can deliver on this vital ambition.

At the moment, we have the 10-point plan from 10 Downing Street. We have the energy White Paper. We are looking forward to a net zero strategy. The LGA is arguing that it is not too late for the idea of a framework to be considered and proposed in the net zero strategy, which we are hoping will come forward soon, which will create the structure for us to articulate the national objectives, the local role and how the actions that are needed can be delivered through local authorities, citizens and national Government working together. At the moment, there are too many gaps, too many people and too many different organisations without a clear role for how this is going to be delivered.



Q67 **Chair:** Thank you. Mr Clewer and Ms Billington, does UK100 also think that it is necessary to have a national framework along the lines being proposed by the LGA?

**Polly Billington:** Yes, we do. We will be publishing our own proposals for a framework in the coming weeks. It needs to include some kind of joint delivery body with national Government. As Councillor Blake points out, there are a number of Ministries that have responsibility for things that make a difference to net zero, but they are not being effectively co-ordinated at national level. The Secretary of State for BEIS himself, at our summit in July, acknowledged the importance of local authorities in being able to achieve this, by saying that he recognised that local and regional government will play a pivotal role as we work towards attracting new green industries to the UK and creating good long-term jobs.

However, there is not at the moment a mechanism to harness local authorities' enthusiasm and connect it up to those Whitehall Departments. We suggest a net zero local delivery board convened by BEIS as the lead Ministry on climate that would bring those other Ministries together. I would also include DEFRA and HMT, for example, in that because ultimately this will end up being not just about power but also about funding.

That helps local authorities co-design solutions with Whitehall. Quite often what we find—the National Audit Office's report into the green homes grant is a good example of this—is that some things dreamed up in Whitehall, as I know, having been a special adviser in Whitehall, can look great on paper in a submission. I know that there are a number of formally elected councillors on this Committee who will know that sometimes you roll your eyes and think, "Do they actually know what it is like to deliver on the ground?"

In terms of net zero, we think that there are ways that we can overcome that if a framework had some kind of governance like a net zero delivery board on top of it, as well as, of course, things like an increase in capabilities, finance mechanisms, and definitions of roles and responsibilities, because that is going to be key—understanding where power currently lies, where those gaps in powers are and where national frameworks at the moment limit local authorities' ability to do what they want to do.

They stand able and willing to do this and they are extremely ambitious. At the moment, quite often it is national frameworks led by Ofgem, Highways England, the national Planning Inspectorate, National Infrastructure Commission, and many others that are limiting the ability of communities and local authorities to do what they want to do.

**Chair:** Mr Clewer, do you have anything that you wish to add?

**Councillor Clewer:** Very briefly, as Polly has made most of the relevant points there. If Covid has taught us anything it is that while Government



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are great at putting a framework and the resource behind an issue that needs addressing, you need to use local authorities on the ground to be able to deal with the reality of delivery.

**Q68 Chair:** Thank you. Councillor Holland, London Councils has called for clearly defined roles for local authorities in a national framework. How do you see that being put together and what roles would you see for the councils that would be involved in that?

**Councillor Holland:** Building on what my fellow participants have just been talking about, we see that, without local authorities' roles being clearly defined, we cannot achieve the maximum of what we could do. I would also say that, without local authorities delivering on the ground, the Government will not meet their own net zero targets.

We are a key partner and, therefore, we have to have clarity around our roles. We have to have better co-ordination. We need better co-ordination between Government Departments but also with us, and a clear policy direction with the requisite resources for us to be able to deliver on the ground. We are delivering. We are creating our own pathways to net zero. We are demonstrating our leadership in our local communities as councils, both across London and up and down the country. Despite very difficult financial challenges, we are innovating. We are pulling all our local levers, working with businesses, working with our world-class institutions, whether they be universities or teaching hospitals, but we need that framework and we need to be able to co-ordinate that funding and that role so that we can target resources, we can get much better value for money and we can get a swifter pathway to net zero.

As to how that is done, we think it should have ministerial clout. It should have political oversight and leadership and it needs to involve local authorities at every level in order to deliver. We see a key role for London Councils in that. The main point is that it needs to be co-ordinated with central Government so that we are in the dialogue and central Government understand how better we can maximise our potential in our communities.

**Q69 Chair:** Thank you. We know that local government is composed of two parts: first, the democratically elected members and, secondly, the staff who work for the local authority in the officer corps. I would like to ask Ms McKenzie how a national framework for net zero might assist local authority environmental directors in developing the net zero strategies.

**Carolyn McKenzie:** I think that it will be very helpful in the sense that it would allow us to long-term plan in terms of giving that consistency. A lot of this work relies on partnership working and, as previously said about co-design, it would make it a lot more friction-free to make those partnerships and get them on equal settings so that there is not any competition between the different partnerships that we deal with at a number of different levels.



Having that framework would also make the most of embedding net zero and climate resilience in all the different funding pots that we have at all the different levels, so that we get more delivered through all our funding streams rather than just separate funding streams.

Lastly, it would enable us to link up the different outcomes so we get the co-benefits that link to putting a pound of money into climate change and climate resilience, which can deliver a lot more than just carbon reduction. It can deliver health. It can deliver education. It can deliver economic development. It gives us that framework to deliver more for the money we have in an easier, partnership-consistent way.

**Chair:** Thank you. We could hear you, but we are having some problems with your sound. We have you as loud as we can possibly make it, but I would be grateful if you could speak as loudly as you can, without shouting, obviously. Thank you.

**Q70 Duncan Baker:** We have learnt from the “Local government and net zero in England” report that there is somewhat of an unco-ordinated and unstrategic approach to local authorities tackling net zero. To Ms Billington first of all, you have called, under the group UK100, for potentially a net zero local powers Bill, which to my mind seems like quite a good idea if this is the report that we are getting, especially as I was a local councillor before finding myself in this place. Just to build on that report, why do you think that legislation is required?

**Polly Billington:** We think that it will be an opportunity to really double down on understanding where the gaps are in the powers and where the limitations currently exist, imposed by national frameworks and national bodies such as the ones that I suggested and outlined. Our report “Power Shift” is a comprehensive analysis of what local authority powers currently exist on net zero and how they can be used, listing all of them.

A good example, and something that I think local authority officers and councillors will be familiar with, is the minimum energy efficiency standard. One of our witnesses, when we took evidence on that, described it as not being worth the paper it is written on because local authorities do not have the resources to enforce it. They have the power to enforce it, but they do not have the resources to enforce it.

At the other end of the scale—when there is so much appetite now for electric vehicle charging, as we talk about meeting the signal to the market sent by Government about people shifting—one of the challenges is whether we have the infrastructure. Local authorities will say they would like to facilitate the installation of infrastructure, and the distribution network operators will say, “It will cost you, or you can put it over there where nobody wants it.”

Understanding that our energy regulations for the market are not fit for a decentralised, decarbonised energy system that will meet the needs of communities to move about, heat and cool their homes and go to and



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from everywhere, as well as feel comfortable, create jobs and so forth, we know that that integrated system needs to have some kind of understanding about what those powers need to be.

We think a Bill is a good wrapper to be able to get together all the things that need to change. Another example might be aligning the planning powers with the Climate Change Act—something that I am sure has come up here before this Committee and that we think is worth considering when planning reform is suggested.

We are exploring what that Bill might need to include. We think it needs to particularly look at where the limitations of those national regulations are inhibiting local capacity. It should not just be about taking those away; it should also be about empowering, facilitating and, arguably, eventually obliging local authorities to take those responsibilities.

Let me be quite clear: if we have those obligations, we will need to have more resources to be able to do it. I know that the comprehensive spending review will be in the minds of everybody here. If there isn't a local net zero component in the comprehensive spending review, many of the strategies based on technologies that the Government want to deliver will not land. We have really good retrofitting, for example, in many of our members, from Swansea through to Manchester, and a big plan by the West Midlands to do neighbourhood-based retrofit. That will not happen unless there is some significant investment in the local infrastructure to make it happen.

If there is one key message I would get out of this, it is that it is not only about the governance, but also about making sure that there is the resource to ensure that net zero lands in places. Jobs will not happen, industries will not develop, and communities will not be transformed unless we have that commitment to local net zero in the comprehensive spending review in a few weeks' time.

**Q71** **Duncan Baker:** You have said many things are important, one of which is resources, which is absolutely key. You also talked about "obliging" local authorities. Let's go a step further. Would you actually want to see it within their statutory duties so that they are legally obliged, let's put it like that—so that they have to enforce certain targets and be measured on that? Would you go as far as to have that statutory framework in place?

**Polly Billington:** Our membership is the most ambitious. Councillor Clewer can talk very eloquently about what is happening both in Wiltshire itself and in our wider Countryside Climate Network, where local authorities are getting to grips with what is possible in rural areas, where previously they have not necessarily been doing as much as in other parts of the country. They have a very steep learning curve. We want to be able to make sure that we facilitate through knowledge share and proper co-ordination via Whitehall and Westminster as much as possible about what is currently possible. Then we will need to make sure that



there is some kind of statutory obligation for the laggards, but that needs to come with resource. If there is obligation without resource, it will be a disaster. If you put obligations in early, then a lot of people simply will not be able to do it. There is no point in having a power like MEES if you cannot enforce it.

Think carefully about those statutory powers. Make sure that you are making the most of what local authorities can and want to do now, and then design ways that might need to have some statutory obligation in order for us to be able to meet our targets, both legally and according to the science.

**Q72 Duncan Baker:** Let's turn that to Councillor Blake with her LGA hat on. Would having statutory powers be something that would motivate you? Is that something that you would like to see—that local authorities have the relevant tools to enforce and have those powers?

**Councillor Blake:** The LGA does not support the statutory duties. There are four general areas as to why that is not the right way to go at the moment.

We have just been discussing how the role, responsibilities and powers are diffuse, and placing statutory duties on local authorities when the delivery mechanisms and the roles and responsibilities do not all rest with local authorities would create more confusion and complexity on the ground for delivering.

As UK100 has just described, it would be completely undeliverable for there to be statutory duties to come without the resources that are necessary. At the moment, there is no clear framework, as we have discussed, to establish those resources and how they should flow through the system.

The third reason why statutory duty is not the way to go is that local authorities are all different in their understandings of the best mechanism. We have with us the Climate Countryside Network. We have urban local authorities like London Councils represented. Local authorities bring with them their own understanding of their communities, and it is their own action plans and their own delivery mechanisms that will make the difference.

Finally, to emphasise the action plans that are in place, 91% of local authorities have a zero-carbon commitment already; 81% have action plans on delivering on their climate emergency pledges. At the moment, local authorities with their own ambitions and delivery mechanisms are stretching themselves in order to deliver. The statutory duty would increase complexity without the framework of powers and funding that we have been discussing earlier.

**Polly Billington:** I would just emphasise that in relation to what Councillor Blake says we are not suggesting any statutory powers without



a framework. I would also say that the difference that we have in England with the devolved Administrations in Wales and Scotland is that there is a standardised way of reporting what you are doing in Wales and Scotland. Again, if there was a recommendation to come from this Committee, it would be that we would have some kind of standardised way of reporting emissions reductions at the local authority level in England, too. At the moment, quite often they might have those very ambitious plans but sometimes you are comparing apples with oranges.

**Councillor Clewer:** To come in on that, I have to lean towards the aim that a statutory requirement is going to be required. I absolutely get that funding will need to follow it.

I have the advantage of representing a unitary authority, I do not have two tiers of local government, but I am acutely aware of other members of CCN where you have two-tier authorities and you have a distinct disparity between the aspirations of some district councils, say, and then the county council. That makes any co-ordinated delivery exceptionally difficult. Without providing both a statutory requirement to address the various elements that would go into achieving zero carbon and also ensuring that there is a flow of funding to achieve that, whether that needs to involve core funding or a steady flow of grants for retrofit, the details of that would be complex. But without that, you are still going to get areas where that tension and that disparate set of focuses is going to make it exceedingly difficult for us to achieve net zero as a country.

We must remember that we do not get to net zero until everyone gets to net zero. It is no use London with a metro Mayor and the ability to focus getting to net zero if Wiltshire hasn't. I would not underestimate the complexity and difficulty of that.

Q73 **Mr Robert Goodwill:** Good afternoon, everyone. Could I start with Councillor Blake? On the Government's net zero strategy, how have you been consulted and, more importantly, listened to in terms of the Government's plans?

**Councillor Blake:** With the net zero strategy, I think what the Local Government Association is looking for is the consideration of a framework, and the framework that we have discussed. On the taskforce and delivery body idea that UK100 is also coming forward with, we want to see strong commitment around delivery there. We also want to make sure that we are seeing recognition of local authority ambition on this. In the nationally determined contributions that have been prepared for COP26, there is no mention of local authority functions and our abilities to convene and use our own spending power. That is surprising, given the scale of ambition and the scale of delivery that local authorities can be responsible for. It is not too late for these considerations to be included in the strategy, which we are anticipating before COP26.

Q74 **Mr Robert Goodwill:** Thank you. Part of the role of this Committee report is to draw the Government's attention to suggestions like that.



Can I turn briefly to Carolyn McKenzie as an officer? We have talked about funding mechanisms and grants being made available, giving local authorities statutory obligations and then maybe not necessarily funding them to the extent that they are needed. To what extent do you think innovation can be improved and instigated by having some sort of bidding processes so that local authorities that come up with innovative schemes should be bidding? I know that the Town Deal bid in my own constituency does have an element of greening. Or is that going to mean a lot of local authorities wasting time on bids that fail?

**Carolyn McKenzie:** From our perspective I am not sure bidding is a good way of doing it. One of the things that we have problems with at the minute is that a lot of funding is short term. Often you have to bid for it in a short timeframe as well, and there are often caveats around it that do not necessarily link in with what the local area needs. It provides more burden than advantage. What we really need is a longer-term view of what funding is available so we can plan and match it with our own funding. We can also work with our supply chain and ensure that they are developed, and they can put in private sector funding for us as well.

One funding stream that has worked for us recently has been the GH LAD programme, doing decarbonisation with deprived communities in housing. The first tranche of that was competitive. The second and third tranches weren't. We were given a certain amount of money per area that was allocated on an evidence-based process, which the county council is co-ordinating. It allowed us to innovate within that freedom, to work with our partners, to look at what was needed, to look at local evidence, and to take a considered approach as to what was needed at a local level. In terms of that freedom around that money, obviously you still need KPIs and you still need to achieve outcomes, but by having that guaranteed funding we can make that work against our own circumstances and, therefore, double up the money that is coming in.

For example, in the first rounds of GH LAD there was no match funding required from a local authority. What SCC did is it put in £750,000 of its own money so that when the grant came in—and it is £10,000 per household—we wanted to put in heat pumps. That is more money than £10,000 will cover. We put in our own funding to be able to take that retrofit even deeper. In a competitive environment, you would not necessarily be able to do that. In a competitive environment, it also means that those are already further forward, are already ahead of those that are behind, so you get a disparity there in that competitive environment.

Q75 **Mr Robert Goodwill:** Understood. Do any other witnesses want to come in? I think that Councillor Clewer was nodding his head.

**Councillor Clewer:** I would absolutely reiterate that. I have a programme to retrofit all of my council housing to an EPCB. The idea of putting in short-notice competitive bids where the money has to be spent in a very short timeframe is an absolute disaster for a scheme like that.



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We need long-term, consistent funding to enable us to deliver in areas where we are not able to do it through the private purse, or private pocket and private sector, to enable those programmes to be delivered over a long period of time.

The critical issue that I would emphasise on why this competitive short-term funding does not work is that we need to create new industries. In Wiltshire, if you want to retrofit a house with a heat pump, heaven help you right now. I have tried to do my own. I am not far from Southampton. It just has not been possible.

I have deliberately done the programme with council housing—the EPCB retrofit—to grow that industry in conjunction with Wiltshire College to make sure that the apprenticeships are put in place to create an industry that will then be able to go on to help retrofit the rest of the housing in Wiltshire. In rural areas we just do not have that concentration of people able to handle the new technologies at the moment. We need consistent bidding, not competitive short-termism.

**Carolyn McKenzie:** Just to come back on that, I agree that, in a sense, when we had the ECO funding a few years ago—and I was leading on this in Kent—we put a lot of emphasis with our supply chain and within the economy on this being a huge opportunity—

**Mr Robert Goodwill:** I am afraid we are struggling to hear you.

**Carolyn McKenzie:** Sorry. When I was in Kent we had a big programme, under the ECO funding programme, and we made a big thing of how you can stimulate growth, you get economy and you can tackle fuel poverty, and we really got the market engaged and really enthusiastic. Then the funding was cut and a lot of businesses that had opened up and started were just decimated in the area. Then the trust is gone. So that short-term competitiveness does not work. It is about the longer-term, reasonable requirements. The longer-term funding is needed.

Apologies for the sound. I have my volume up high and I am shouting as much as I can.

**Mr Robert Goodwill:** Thank you very much. Not every witness needs to come in on every question, Chair, do they?

**Polly Billington:** I just wanted to emphasise a couple things in relation to the finance point. One is that sometimes we have grants for particular projects and everybody gets very excited by them and everybody says, “Well, why can’t we have that here?” A really good example is the electrification of buses that is happening in Oxford and in Coventry. The electrification of buses will happen in Oxford and in Coventry but there is no business model that is being tested in Oxford or in Coventry that is transferrable, or replicable or adaptable to other places. It is entirely dependent on the grant. Those two have won that bid and it does not create any learnings for anywhere else.



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The other point about the short and long-term investment is about creating markets for the private sector to come in. If you do short-term stuff, particularly on retrofit, which everybody always thinks has to be done by grant funding, you are missing the opportunity to create markets like Councillor Clewer is doing in Wiltshire—not only creating markets but also creating a supply chain.

Those are two things that, if you do not have an existing market, there is a case for Government intervention in order to be able to shape them. We would not have the tumbling prices on offshore wind if it had not been for Government intervention across a number of different Administrations of different political stripes. It did not happen by magic. We need to have a similar kind of approach on local, proven technologies integrated together in a place-based style.

**Q76 Mr Robert Goodwill:** Thank you very much. I must declare an interest as Chair of the all-party bus and coach group. Indeed, the Government are committed to 4,000 zero-emissions buses, and we will be delivering the letter next week to the Prime Minister encouraging him to increase that and to be more ambitious. It is not just the cost of vehicles; it is the charging facilities at the depots or, indeed, hydrogen fuelling as well.

**Councillor Holland:** I agree with all the points that have been made, but may I add one final point, and that is about the impact on local authorities' resources in having to build the skills, expertise and capacities just to bid? Those members of staff, who come very highly trained and skilled, and who could be better deployed actually delivering programmes on the ground that reduce carbon emissions, are instead spending their time having to learn how to bid.

Often local authorities are not successful because, by definition, the competitive process means that only some will be successful. Yet, we all have to spend that time and that valuable staff resource bidding and then on all the other comments, so that is a waste of our resources now and then there are all of the other comments. Often, there is a narrow window when you have to deliver.

In the Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery Scheme at the moment the paperwork was only signed off very recently. We were supposed to have delivered 75% of the capital spend by September, this month. It is just not possible. So, it is fragmented, it is broken, it is not working and I would agree with all the comments of colleagues who are saying it needs to be long term. It needs to be certain so that we can plan, so that we can collaborate, we can pull in that investment, we can work with our universities and work with our businesses in order to build up that supply chain, invest in local skills and drive a low carbon economy locally.

**Q77 Mr Robert Goodwill:** If local authorities are successful bidding, they will have a better view of it. Certainly, in my constituency part of our town bid is for a green construction skills village, which is being developed. The



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successful local authorities probably like the bidding schemes better than the ones who do all the work and then don't go through with it.

**Polly Billington:** There are 22 grant funds that local authorities can apply for with net zero-related work just in 2020-21. Navigating that, if you are in a town hall is, frankly, a massively inefficient way of going about things. There is an argument for changing grants to something that actually creates the opportunity for business models and to have a critical friend who can navigate all of those pots so that you can pull something together that can have a multiplier effect, and that is what we need to look for.

**Councillor Holland:** Chair, just to be clear, we have had a successful bid, so I am saying that as leader of a council where we have been a successful applicant. Also, just to come back, sir, to the point that you made at the very beginning of your question: does that lead to innovation? We are innovating as local authorities. We want to learn from each other. We want to learn from central Government. That is why we are calling for more co-ordinated action, more collaboration.

We have those levers that we can pull locally and innovate with our local businesses and bring in investment, so we are innovating, but we could just do so much more if it was better co-ordinated and we had certainty of funding and sufficiency of funding.

**Mr Robert Goodwill:** Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

**Chair:** Ms McKenzie, did you want to come in on that?

**Carolyn McKenzie:** Yes, just on a quick point, in the sense that there is quite a lot of external resource available to us for expertise. But there is a key point that, if it is embedded within the local authority, we can use that small amount of funding to capacity-build within our staff across the council so that it is more consistent and it remains there, rather than being external and then going away. That embedding enables more funding and more capacity to be built.

**Polly Billington:** I would note that the Government's investment in the energy hubs in England has helped create that kind of capacity for local authorities, including funding things like minimum energy efficiency standards enforcement, solar farms and all kinds of things. That kind of support, which enables local authorities to increase their capabilities and do it at scale across regions, is something that I think it should be acknowledged this Government has done something good with.

**Mr Robert Goodwill:** Thank you. I think the Chair is wanting to make some progress now.

**Chair:** Indeed. Jerome.

Q78 **Jerome Mayhew:** Thank you. We are running pretty seriously behind time now, so if I could ask all the respondents to be pithy and direct in your responses, that would be great. I am going to start with Councillor



Blake. The LGA has put forward a recommendation that we should create some kind of climate taskforce and that should be led from the MHCLG. There has been a high degree of consensus among all of the respondents today, and also from the NAO, that there is a real weakness in the collaboration and the transfer of information, as well as money, from central Government to local government. What would be the objectives of this taskforce?

**Councillor Blake:** The purpose of the taskforce is to look at each of the ambitions to understand the roles and responsibilities of different organisations within the system and to make sure that we are delivering on those ambitions. We have suggested that it has to be ministerial. I think there has been a discussion on some of the other points around the idea of a framework, but what the objectives must be is around delivery and understanding the roles and functions of different partners and making sure that everybody is co-ordinated in their delivery of the changes that are needed.

Q79 **Jerome Mayhew:** The National Audit Office has made a similar recommendation but it has not expressed an opinion as to which Department should be the lead on this. You have put forward the idea that it should be MHCLG, but BEIS—the Business Department—has the overall lead for net zero, so why is it? Should local authorities be seen to work with BEIS as the interrelation with the climate taskforce, as opposed to MHCLG?

**Councillor Blake:** We have recommended that MHCLG should be leading this. We see local authorities as being absolutely critical in some of the place-based work that has been discussed already. Local authorities are the places—we are the organisations—that have the delivery mechanisms, the supply chains, to make those changes to our local infrastructure. Whether or not you are in a metropolitan area, in London or in a rural area, there are those delivery mechanisms within local authorities that can make those changes to places that we think would be most effective, recognising that BEIS has the overall responsibility around net zero. Clearly, BEIS would have a role on this ministerial taskforce.

We think that it is its delivery capabilities and the fact that local authorities are grounded in their places that may mean that MHCLG would be best placed to lead this taskforce. Another of our recommendations is that we—

Q80 **Jerome Mayhew:** Could I cut you short there because we are so short of time, unless it is really on point? Polly Billington, do you agree, that it should be MHCLG? I think you have come up with—

**Polly Billington:** We have suggested convening by BEIS because it has the responsibility for climate. We know that local authorities need to be part of the design and delivery of technological solutions. BEIS will be thinking, “How do we decarbonise the energy system? How do we shape and regulate the market so that that can happen? How can we support



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particular industries?" We do think that MHCLG does have to be part of that net zero delivery board, absolutely, but we do think that, with the climate change responsibility sitting in BEIS and a significant amount of the technology being there, that makes sense. But, again, land use is in DEFRA, and transport is in DfT. There has to be proper co-ordination. We think BEIS is probably best placed to do it, but I am not going to go to war on it.

**Q81 Jerome Mayhew:** Let's not fight. It is very interesting, in some of your earlier comments, that it is arm's length organisations, like Ofgem, in particular, and the National Grid, which have huge responsibilities and are absolutely crucial in putting in the framework around which local government, and the rest of the Government for that matter, are going to have to build the future, and at the moment—

**Polly Billington:** It seems that Ofgem is now starting to suggest changes to its own regulatory framework. That in itself is an innovation that I think we should all welcome, because if it understands that the rules need to change, rather than simply implementing them, it is getting the fact that this needs a different kind of market regulation.

**Q82 Jerome Mayhew:** As the result of a large degree of lobbying from a number of Back Benchers. I am glad you picked up on that. It is a first baby step, but it is definitely a step in the right direction.

Opening it up to the other panellists, is there a case for establishing the joint taskforce? This is a consensus point, isn't it?

**Councillor Holland:** Yes, absolutely. London Councils totally supports the setting up of a taskforce led at senior level. We are more neutral on which Department runs it. We just want it to be effective, to co-ordinate and to collaborate—as Polly said—across all the different Departments and with local government.

**Q83 Jerome Mayhew:** Finally, Councillor Clewer, what is your view?

**Councillor Clewer:** I absolutely agree. In my experience, the biggest blockage in the flow of decarbonising at the moment is a lack of comprehension of the impacts of the planning system. An organisation like that would be very well placed to get planning at a centralised level to be able to understand the implications of planning at the local level to be able to deliver.

**Q84 Jerome Mayhew:** A final quick word from Carolyn McKenzie.

**Carolyn McKenzie:** Yes, I totally agree. It doesn't really matter who leads, to a certain extent, but it does matter that everyone is clear about what their role and accountabilities are and that they are kept to those roles and accountabilities.

**Q85 Caroline Lucas:** I want to come to the issue of the planning system, which has been touched on a couple of times. My first question is to Councillor Holland. Clearly, you will know that the Government consulted



on reforms to the planning system. I wondered what your views were of the potential or otherwise that those reforms might have in terms of enabling councils to reach net zero.

**Councillor Holland:** London Councils' position is that any reforms of the planning system need to strengthen the power of local planning authorities and not weaken them, and that we need to ensure that delivering net zero is fully integrated into all planning decisions at every level. This would go hand in hand with the high standard of building regulations set nationally, so that needs to be brought forward.

We need to have robust national standards but we need to be able to have local control. We are concerned about the White Paper's proposals to restrict councils' abilities to set policies locally in line with local needs and in line with energy efficiency, climate change and tackling the biodiversity crisis in terms of nature and green space.

We do welcome the revised version of the National Planning Policy Framework and the commitment to reference the Climate Change Act, but we think it needs to be stronger. We want robust nationally set standards that lay the foundation and enable us to have teeth locally but for the power locally to be able to make those decisions, because we know our communities and we know what the needs are, and they are going to be very different. Even within London they are very different between the different London councils.

**Q86 Caroline Lucas:** Can I put the same question to Polly Billington? I was just reflecting and reading that in places like France, for example, it is now law that if you are making a new building, the roof has to be either solar or a natural kind of roof. If you are in the Netherlands, as I understand it, you cannot link a new development up to the gas grid and so forth. There seems to be a much clearer sense of what is coming from a national level, but at the same time you need to balance that with the local democracy, so I wondered what your thoughts were specifically on the Government's planning reforms right now and how they might need to be changed.

**Polly Billington:** I think they need to be changed so that they are in line with the Climate Change Act. What we see is things like the Future Homes Standard. We have created a ceiling rather than a floor on sustainability standards for buildings. Local authorities find that, even if they put more ambitious sustainable building criteria into their planning frameworks, the national Planning Inspectorate will come along and rip them out on the basis that it is a drag on the market.

What you should be doing is seeing that as an opportunity to create a market where you are no longer externalising your environmental costs but are looking at creating buildings, and homes in particular, that are cheaper to run, to keep warm and to keep cool in summer.



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We have seen mistakes happen in the past. Obviously, the Future Homes Standard has been revised a little bit, but what we ultimately need is minimum standards. The Government need to hang tough with developers, who will always say, "Oh, it is not viable," and say, "Well, it won't be viable for anybody to live in, because they won't be able to afford to heat it or cool it. They will end up finding that they have extreme weather events. They won't be able to insure it." Those kinds of costs are the kinds of costs that will end up being a burden on renters or homeowners unless we get those standards right. That is where we need to focus on what happens for consumers and communities if we get this wrong.

We are already building homes now that are going to need to be retrofitted. That is a perverse way of going about how we build for the future.

**Q87 Caroline Lucas:** Thank you. I noticed that Councillor Clewer was nodding at one point. Could I ask you, in particular, if you think that the current rules that are being consulted on do give local authorities enough scope, and how you would want to change them?

**Councillor Clewer:** I am afraid I don't. I think it needs to go further. Building regs should say everything should be zero carbon now. I am building zero carbon council housing in Wiltshire. It is costing 4% more than the council houses we were building previously.

We have to force the market to shift, and planning is probably the best way of doing it. At the moment, we have the absurdity of housing being built across Wiltshire that—as Polly said—is not efficient. It will require significant retrofit and it will require it in 10 years. There is some insanity there and it needs changing at speed.

We also have to be careful with it. If we push too far in planning, particularly around transport, the solutions that will work in London are not the solutions that will work in Wiltshire, so there has to be flexibility to enable us to decarbonise transport, for example, in ways that work locally. But more generally around the simple house building element, which is the biggest blockage in planning right now, we just need to flick that switch so that you have no option but to build zero carbon housing.

**Q88 Caroline Lucas:** Lovely. Can I just see if there are any other quick reflections from Councillor Blake or Carolyn McKenzie in terms of how you would seek to amend the Government's proposals on planning that have not already been covered?

**Councillor Blake:** I would add just three things. First, the planning and environment Bills do need to be aligned, and at the moment there is no confirmation that that should happen. When we think about planning as being an important part of net zero, I think there is a risk that we focus on current standards. We need to consider the planning policies and how planning systems and local plans can influence retrofitting, but also



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mitigation measures and adaptation measures as well in order to respond to any changes in the climate.

Finally, I think some of the LGA approach to some of the proposals around the slimming down means that some of the level of sustainability assessments and the changes proposed within the planning White Paper mean that the level of sustainability and how viability of new sites is considered, and a duty to co-operate within the proposals, will mean that some sustainability and standards will not be carefully considered enough in the planning application process.

Q89 **Caroline Lucas:** Thank you. Finally, Carolyn McKenzie.

**Carolyn McKenzie:** I would agree with all that was said before. The one caution I would say is that planning departments are often very stretched, both at a district level and at county level. There needs to be clear and consistent—*[Inaudible.]*

Q90 **Caroline Lucas:** We are struggling. I think you are saying that the planning departments are very stretched?

**Carolyn McKenzie:** The planning departments, at both district and county levels, are very stretched. Having that clear and consistent guidance that helps them make informed decisions will be really helpful, as will helping there to be consistency between two-tier areas where we have an upper-tier authority and district there as well. Having those consistent policies within county boundaries would be really useful.

Q91 **Claudia Webbe:** Welcome to everybody, and thanks for joining us. Can I just ask my first question, which is about funding? I want to continue this theme about funding, because we know that funding is critical for local authorities if they are to deliver this work on net zero. The Government have announced a UK investment bank. Carolyn, could I ask you, from your perspective, what practical support will local authorities need if they are to be able to access the UK investment bank's offer? I think the Government have indicated £4 billion that local authorities can apply up to. But what support will local authorities need, if I can ask that first of you, Carolyn.

**Carolyn McKenzie:** First, the key thing to say is that, in terms of the terms and conditions for those loans, they should be reasonable and simple and easy to understand. There is a big ask around capital. Capital is not always a problem. It is about feasibility funding that gets you to the point of making a business case to apply for capital funding, so support on building that business case, especially where some of these projects might be huge. We also want that cost to be spread over a number of years—in three, five or 10 years' time. So, it is about how we can look at different ways of financing through that.

There is also the consideration with the investment bank. If we invest in that infrastructure and these big capital projects, there is a revenue cost to that, so how do we cope with that revenue cost of that borrowing?



There is also going to be putting infrastructure in place. We have a shiny, new piece of infrastructure. There is maintenance and management there as well. So, it can't be just about creating new things and new infrastructure, we have to look at the whole piece from concept right the way through to delivery and eventually disposal or reuse.

**Q92 Claudia Webbe:** Thank you. Polly, can I just ask you the same question, because the Government have indicated that the UK investment bank was modelled off the UK100 and I just want to have this cleared up? What are your thoughts?

**Polly Billington:** We proposed a net zero development bank, which is not quite the way that the UK infrastructure bank is shaping up, although we are continuing to have conversations with the Treasury and others about things, such as the nature of the net zero mandate, so that loans are not made on anything which isn't net zero. I think a reasonable question for anybody here to ask Government Ministers is: would this UK infrastructure bank fund a coalmine in Cumbria, for example? If the answer is anything other than an emphatic no, I think we might not quite have the mandate as strong as we need it to be.

We are very clear that this should be a development bank as distinct from an investment bank, in that we are looking for development capital. That is earlier on in the pipeline. It goes to Carolyn's point about developing projects so that they are ready for the private market. This, therefore, crowds in private capital because what you have done is you have de-risked it for the big guys, for the big boys—for the pension funds and so forth—and then they kind of go, "Okay, so we can put in £X millions over 25 years at a comparatively low rate of return because that becomes a solid investment for us."

So we are very clear that, if you want to make sure that this works to create that pipeline and make the most of that capital that the private sector will say is swilling around and there isn't the projects to do that, the development bank—as we think it should be—needs to be the one that turns those concepts into practical, investible projects and programmes so that the private sector can say, "Yes, we can do that at scale." They will not get out of bed for the size of things that, quite often, local authorities are doing, because local authorities are cautious, they are short of money, and the feasibility studies end up being for small things, like half a dozen houses rather than thousands.

So that is what needs to happen. That is where we think the UK infrastructure bank really needs to be. We continue to have those conversations with the team who are devising the bank in the Treasury and with BEIS, to make sure that this is development capital with a critical friend to guide people through, do the financial due diligence and turn ideas into investible propositions.

**Q93 Claudia Webbe:** Thank you for that. I think that is an important input to have. We know that the Government probably have not assessed the



totality of funding that central Government provides in relation to local authorities and the delivery of net zero. The scale and extent, the nature, what is needed in terms of innovation and growth and what is needed in terms of consistency of approach across the country is in fact huge, from my perspective. We know that there is a forthcoming spending review. I want to know, probably from all the panellists, how the forthcoming spending review will reflect the potential contribution of local authorities to net zero. Councillor Holland, can I draw on you to contribute first?

**Councillor Holland:** I think you are absolutely right that we don't have a needs assessment, and that has to be the first step. Going back to your previous question about the infrastructure bank, there is £4 billion set aside for local authority lending, in London. London Councils estimate that just to retrofit homes—so forgetting transport and all the other areas that we need to address to get to net zero—across London would cost £98 billion. While we welcome the funding, there is no sense of understanding of the scale and of the funding required, so we would say we absolutely need to have that needs assessment, which is why we want the framework and why we want to work and collaborate more closely with central Government.

We need that central Government support to support us at a local level to build that capacity and to use our levers and build that collaboration to invest in local jobs and skills. In terms of that certainty, if you have the needs assessment, we have a greater understanding of what is required. As Polly says, it is about attracting investment in because people are not going to come and invest in local authorities, whether that be in London or Wiltshire, if they cannot be certain that we are going to continue to require the services to acquire whatever it is.

Out there, when you just look at retrofit alone, the breadth and depth of the jobs and skills that we can recreate is extraordinary. It can really help us recover from Covid. It can help us address the climate. It can help us address inequality, when you look at carpentry, engineers, heating engineers—the whole array. It would also enable us to tackle inequalities around fuel poverty. The learning that we have from Covid is that those most at risk will suffer the most through the climate crisis and climate change.

I would absolutely agree that, as a first point, we need that needs assessment and we need central Government to understand the impact that we can make at a local level in terms of driving that low carbon economy.

Q94 **Claudia Webbe:** Rachel, from the Local Government Association, I think it would be important to hear a national perspective. Councillor Blake.

**Councillor Blake:** Just to give an example of why the needs assessment and the framework is so important, the £3.8 capital social housing decarbonisation fund has to be welcomed, but our own estimates, commissioned through Savills, are that there is annual additional demand



for energy efficiency works of £1 billion per year over our 30-year housing revenue account business plans, so that just demonstrates the scale of the need. That is just our own council housing stock, setting aside housing association stock and other needs for retrofitting and the ways in which other types of homes and businesses might need to be retrofitted.

When we are talking about funding, we need to recognise that there is an annual cost pressure on local authorities of £2.5 billion, £1.1 billion of which is on adult social care, so this whole discussion is taking place in a context of local authorities being under pressure with setting their budgets. The way that capital projects are established can't consistently be funded through bidding projects, as we were discussing earlier. The main objective, the core objective, of the spending review should be to stabilise local authority funding and to establish a needs assessment for net zero ambitions, because we know that the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund only scratches the surface of what is needed in our social housing stock.

**Polly Billington:** Can I follow up on that? This isn't just about lots of money being spent and then it sort of disappearing. Remember, the investment in these things creates growth and jobs and also retains value in the local economy. In terms of the people who are poorest, particularly if you are tackling fuel poverty and social housing, that money gets retained in the local economy. PwC has been commissioned by Innovate UK to look at the economic case for investing in local net zero action. It can see a 2.5% to 3.5% growth above what our normal predictions are on this if this is done in a locally designed way. We must see this not just as funding in that then disappears; this is actually investment in our communities.

Again, like Councillor Holland has pointed out, there are opportunities to attract in and crowd in private finance that will make a significant difference. I would not want anybody to go away with the idea that this is simply a whole load of taxpayers' money where we see no benefit for it in the future or where everything has to be paid for by the taxpayers. We have calculated that £5 billion would create £100 billion-worth of private investment. That was in our report last year, sponsored by Siemens. They know that there is an enormous amount of opportunity here. It is not as though local authorities are here on their own. They have good, strong corporate partners, who also understand the power of local.

Q95 **Claudia Webbe:** That is an important point. I want to be clear about the fact that we have this forthcoming spending review and the ability to influence it. I guess, to some extent, there is an opportunity now. Councillor Clewer, would you be recommending something like a ring-fenced approach to the spending review in relation to local government funding for its work on net zero?

**Councillor Clewer:** I think you probably have to, yes. We are at a point now where if we are going to come close to hitting 2035, 2040—forget



2030—for retrofit, we have to flip now from talking about and taking the first tentative steps to consistently delivering the retrofitting, the adaptation, to provide whatever, whether it be electricity or hydrogen, the new grid for transport and so on. Given the pressure on councils if things are not ring-fenced, both essentially in government but also from our own point of view, it will be quite hard to defend funding of that nature.

I also think we need to be very careful with whatever it is that is coming centrally, so that it understands the local issues that exist—for example, grid capacity. In the south-west, we have extremely difficult issues with grid capacity that make the pressure that I am under to put in more electric charging points very difficult to proceed with. So there are differing priorities there that also need to be picked up through any spending review. With whatever approach is taken, it cannot just be one size fits all. We have to address the specific problems in the way of a path to decarbonisation in each part, each region, of the UK.

**Carolyn McKenzie:** Can I come in on that point very briefly? Yes, absolutely, having ring-fenced funding is key and it allows us to develop further capacity. But there is also a lot of funding coming in in other different parts, like the Levelling Up Fund and other funds, where we need to be putting in conditions or priorities that address net zero and that focus on net zero. It shouldn't just be about the specific expert funding, but also about mainstreaming the priorities across all forms of funding, and then you will get more for your money.

**Polly Billington:** I would back up Carolyn on that. Those 22 pots add up to a few billion quid, which is great, but it pales in comparison to the Local Prosperity Fund, the Towns Fund, the Levelling Up Fund, none of which have net zero criteria on them for that kind of investment. I will say this because I always say this: if you have a £27 billion road programme, your active travel programme looks a little bit like small potatoes. In terms of how we are going to transform and decarbonise our transport system, yes, of course we are going to need roads because we need something for the electric vehicles to go on, but thinking that there is an economic case for that in the way that there has been in the past is a misunderstanding of the way that we will have to change our investment in transport in the future.

Q96 **Cherilyn Mackrory:** Good afternoon, panel. I will try to be brief, because time is marching on. Richard Clewer, can I start with you and talk about community engagement? What scope is there for local authorities to engage with their communities to promote climate action, and could you give me some good examples that you have experienced?

**Councillor Clewer:** There is huge scope, but it is also fraught with difficulty because of the pace of change, and it has to be linked in not just with net zero, but with environmental action as well. In urban areas, net zero is far more of an important trigger. In rural areas, the environment is the trigger. That is how we get more people engaged,



rather than the sort of Extinction Rebellion group, who have the ability to put the backs up of people otherwise. It has to be broader than that.

Parish councils are a key way. In my own village, for example, there is a green group. It is small steps, but it is steps to reduce single-use plastic, and groups like that are engaged and willing to move forward, but we have to make sure that, first, there is the policy framework that lets us proceed and that we don't do silly things around planning that make them turn around and say, "What is the point in us taking our small step when we see 3,000 houses being built on the edge of Trowbridge, none of which have any form of renewable energy in them at all?" We have to engage with them in a conversation. You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. It has to be a positive conversation, where we are not lecturing them, but engaging with them and enabling them.

**Q97** **Cherilyn Mackrory:** Thank you. I am pleased you mentioned parish councils, because, certainly, they are very enthusiastic. That is fantastic. I will open it up to the rest of the panel. What challenges do you and your fellow council leaders have? Certainly in Cornwall we have very important competing issues, such as an acute housing crisis. How can you get people's attention and have effective local engagement when there are other such pressing issues? I will start with Carolyn because you had your hand up.

**Carolyn McKenzie:** It is funny you should ask, because last night we had a community forum and we had nearly 100 people attending virtually through east Surrey, looking at exactly how they can deliver on our net zero strategy. They were very appreciative that we were coming to them at early stages and saying, "This is what we are trying to do. What do you think? How can you engage?" They really want that conversation, and they want to know. We are saying EV cars, and they are saying, "We can't afford it." It is just that appreciation of local issues. But the key thing that came up yesterday was, first, incentives. It is like a carrot. That came up so many different times. If you want people to do it, you need to make it attractive for them to do it, as well as saying, "You have to."

The other thing, and it comes back to the resource issue, is you can't just do it and you are done. Community engagement, dealing with residents, takes up an awful lot of time—theirs and ours. If we just do it once on a consultation, on a strategy, and then go away for the next six months or a year, we will just lose that believability. We need to have the resource to do that meaningful engagement that carries on and doesn't just stop.

**Councillor Blake:** The LGA has collated lots of fantastic examples of community engagement, and I would just refer you to them. Swindon is doing great projects; Warwickshire has a community development fund to nurture ideas. The theme that I would like to emphasise is the co-benefits that we have mentioned briefly in this discussion. I think it will be very important for the Committee to continue thinking about the co-benefits of some of the behaviour changes—active travel, different uses



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of space, the use of open space and the offsetting benefits of that. The community connection benefits around mental health are something that local authorities are very well-placed to make sure happen in a meaningful and powerful way. Please do have a look at all the case studies that the Local Government Association has collated.

**Polly Billington:** I would add that we are not going to tackle climate change with just the enthusiasts being perfect. This has to be about mainstreaming this for most people. That is one of the reasons why local government is very good, not only because they have a very important democratic role about accountability—therefore, if things are done with local authorities convening people together, you have more opportunity to do things with people rather than to people—but also because they are worrying about emptying the bins, keeping the lights on, protecting vulnerable children and all the other things that come across your desk as a local councillor.

Your climate change priority has to sit with those things, so you are thinking, “What am I doing about somebody who has kids who are going off the rails and who is worrying about their rent?” They are not spending all their time going, “Can I manage to be vegan this week? Can I separate my recycling?” They are thinking, “Can I keep my kids on the rails?” You want to make it as easy as possible for those people, and mainstreaming it like that is one of the reasons why local authorities are very well placed to find a way to make sure that everybody can do what is needed, without it being a kind of enthusiast’s charter.

I think this is particularly important, because what we are doing now is easy. Things are going to get harder, especially because the science is making it more and more brutal that we are going to have to do more things quickly. The most important thing is to make sure that the easier stuff is done soon and that people go, “You know what, that was quite good. It was not as much of a disaster as I thought it was going to be. It wasn’t alien to me. It gave me benefits that I had not thought of before and things that matter to me, like jobs, prosperity, better health.”

That is where we can get to, and I think that is one of the reasons for local authorities’ stories about improving their places and their communities. Richard will say they will spend far too much time in meetings. If you think about why you spend all of your time in meetings rather than with your family, at least you will have the legacy of saying, “I have left my place better than I found it, particularly when it comes to tackling climate change.”

**Councillor Holland:** I agree with all those comments, and I say that because we live in our community, we are of our community and represent them. We are place-shapers and we are best placed to be able to work with our community and understand the different needs, because they are all different. Look at the sterling work that Kensington and Chelsea are doing, for example, with residents to co-design retrofit



measures, or the work that we are doing in Lambeth with Groundwork to bring in young people—going back to Polly’s point about tying up all the different aspects of people’s lives. You don’t have to be an enthusiast. We are bringing in young people to do work experience in green industries, and then we are using the kickstart project to be able to offer them apprenticeships and jobs and skills. You need to tackle everything all at the same time. Reaching net zero is a golden thread running through everything that we do as a local authority, on top of tackling inequalities at the same time.

**Cherilyn Mackrory:** Thank you. Promoting a change of culture then.

**Councillor Holland:** We are doing it.

**Chair:** Our final question is from Helen.

Q98 **Helen Hayes:** Thank you very much, Chair. I have two questions, but in the interests of time I am going to wrap them up into one question. I am interested in local climate action plans. How effective are they at demonstrating real change to communities in specific local authority areas? I would like you to think about that over time, so not only from the moment when the plan is announced and published. How effective and meaningful is the ongoing monitoring typically and the reporting on climate action plans, which obviously pull together lots of different strands of activity across local authority areas? Comments from everybody. You don’t have to express a view, but everyone can if they wish to. I will start with Rachel Blake from the LGA perspective, if that is okay.

**Councillor Blake:** I think having a climate action plan is critical for making sure that you deliver on climate emergency declarations. I know that there are different models across local authorities for tracking it over time. They can be established. There is no requirement, but they can be launched in cabinet meetings to give that public-facing demonstration of a commitment, and I think community groups and community panels can track them over time. They can be a very important tool for that community connection work to demonstrate how there is improvement over time. I would add that they are also an important mechanism for local authorities to do some of that needs assessment, and they certainly have been in the ones that I have had a chance to look at—that needs assessment for the kinds of funding that is necessary so that local authorities can plan that place-based investment that is necessary.

**Carolyn McKenzie:** It is absolutely essential to have a plan, I completely agree with you, and it needs to be evidence-based so that we can make sure the funding we do have is focused absolutely properly. What I think we need to realise, though, is that there is a big difference between the complicated plan that officers work with, which is often full of acronyms, and what we put out to the public, which needs to be easily accessible and understandable and that people can grasp and understand. But, absolutely, having a plan is very important.



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**Helen Hayes:** Thank you. Richard Clewer, do you want to come in on this?

**Councillor Clewer:** I will perhaps be slightly more cynical. I think they could be very effective, but at the moment we don't have the flow of funding, the flow of the ability to implement them coming through or the market capacity for the private sector or private housing businesses to make the changes that will be required to make them effective. Yes, they are critical, they need to be there, but they need to be backed up with the resource that enables us to demonstrate delivery on them, which will become a beneficial feedback loop, because the more we deliver, the more people will think, "Oh gosh, that wasn't too bad. We can deliver as well." But it is going to require that resource to make them the useful tool that they will be.

**Polly Billington:** We have asked our members who have made the net zero commitment to start reporting on their emissions. Like I said, in England there isn't a standardised way of doing that, although there is in Scotland and Wales, and that makes it easier for people to benchmark. We have also said, though, if you have declared a climate emergency, the last thing you do is send people like Carolyn away to a small room to make a very complicated plan over months, which then gets published, which nobody understands, because it won't satisfy either your enthusiasts or your mainstream people, who just want it sorted, thank you very much.

What you do need to do is demonstrate willingness now. We have emphasised the need to make sure you have visible actions that people can see—whether that is tree planting, dockless bikes, cycle lanes, electric buses or whatever it is—and start demonstrating that you care about it. As I say, what you need to be doing is tap-dancing in front of the curtains while somebody is building a fantastic scenery for the finale. That is what needs to be done so that people can see there is something happening and you get your plan in place. But—this is important—the regular reporting on that is happening in very different ways across the country, and that means it is hard for accountability.

One of the key things is also making sure that local councillors, who have a scrutiny function, can understand how to hold administrations to account when it comes to those plans, as well as the public, because otherwise what you quite often have is that a local authority can say they have massively reduced their emissions and what they have basically done is sold their assets. The emissions are still happening in their area; they are just no longer the council's responsibility. That isn't happening as much as it might have done in the past, but you do need to be very careful about how people are measuring emissions reductions and what that means for the whole community.

**Councillor Holland:** Yes, I agree that plans can be very dry and technical. We have felt very much, as a local authority, that we had to



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create it for ourselves and learn a lot ourselves. That is why we want better co-ordination, so that we can share best practice and learn from each other and steal from each other basically, and then not to have to reinvent the wheel every time.

But I also want to make the point about a local authority area-wide plan, as opposed to a council plan, because, as councils, in terms of our own estates, we are responsible for not very much of the emissions—my example is as a borough as a whole or a local authority area as a whole. We are working in Lambeth, as I am sure you know, following our citizens' assembly—our first ever one—in putting together a borough-wide plan, bringing community consensus with us and getting buy-in from stakeholders, universities, our teaching hospitals, our businesses, whoever. That is a way of being able to garner the expertise, but also to motivate that collaboration and that community support and to be able to reach a wider audience and get different messages across. I think it is very important that we differentiate between those two different types of plans as well.

**Chair:** I am not sure if we will be able to have a recommendation where we ask Kwasi Kwarteng to tap dance in front of the curtain.

**Polly Billington:** I wouldn't recommend that myself.

**Chair:** It is quite an image in my mind. Can I thank you for your contributions this afternoon? It has been very useful, and it has certainly brought to life for us the issue of net zero and the perspectives from the local authorities, elected members and officers. I hope that you follow our inquiry as we go forward. Thank you.

### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Sally Barnard and Geoff Barnard.

Q99 **Chair:** Dr Barnard and Mr Barnard, welcome. We are very grateful that you have taken the time to come along this afternoon. You made a submission to our inquiry on behalf of the South East Climate action group, which you represent. As part of that submission, you stated that "local authorities have little chance of driving the level of change needed to meet the global emergency". Can you talk us through why you came to that conclusion and why your members agree with such? Oh, I apologise, can I ask you if you could make a short opening statement?

**Dr Barnard:** Yes, I would like to do that, thank you. I am a retired GP. We are both volunteers. I am the co-ordinator of the South East Climate Alliance. This alliance has been rapidly growing for the last two and a half years. We are now up to 110 community groups across all types across the south-east. We are all trying to help our local communities to act on the climate and nature crisis, but we are also trying to engage with our local councils to get action quicker, and we are trying our best to hold



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them to account in our own ways, which are a little inadequate, but that is what we are trying to do.

We cover Kent, Surrey, East and West Sussex and Hampshire. Those are the boundaries we have set ourselves as just about manageable. I am the co-ordinator, and Geoff, my husband, is the communications lead. He also sits on the climate advisory group for West Sussex County Council and Horsham District Council. This has evolved along the way. We thought we would be more use to you as a team.

First, can I just say we are impressed by our democratic process and that we find ourselves here? Thank you very much for the opportunity. Sitting listening, I feel this is a very important moment, hearing all these messages and people seem to be agreeing with each other and saying a lot of the things that we have been pushing for and hoping for over the last many years, but for the last two years particularly.

There is one big message I want to get over from us out in the community and that is the urgency. On behalf of all the community groups, there is real frustration and anxiety building up, not just among us green groups or action groups; we are starting to feel it from the general population too. People need to know what is happening and they need to know a plan. I wanted to say that the National Audit Office's report that you commissioned sounds excellent. There are lots of good recommendations in it. It is a big relief to hear that the difficulties that local authorities face are being recognised and that solutions are starting to be found, and all around I am hearing people agreeing on them.

I would imagine that all our community groups would back up the recommendations that are being put forward and see our local councils as crucial, central, to delivering them, because they are the people we relate to. We are not going to try to contact someone in national Government to get help; we will go to our local council. That is why we have been trying to influence our local councils, because we see them as near to us and we assume they are the ones that are going to help us.

There are four reports that came out within the last 10 months, that I am aware of anyway. There is the Climate Change Committee's "Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget", there is UK100's "Power Shift", there is ADEPT's "Blueprint" and there is the National Audit Office's "Local government and net zero in England". Out in the sticks, I feel this sense of relief that people are pooling their thoughts together on this, but it is 10 months later and in our crucial window when we have to act. That is 10 months that have gone by, and we need urgency.

I think it is excellent, what is happening here today. I realise that the report that you put out is not necessarily going to get taken up by the Government. I am not clear about how this works, but I understand this is going to be a report. Can you assure us that you will do everything in your power to get this—which seems to have broad agreement—into the Government putting it into action and getting the necessary laws passed?



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We are all waiting to hear the plans and we all want to get on with it. That is my message. So here we are. We will do our best to answer your questions.

**Q100 Chair:** Thank you. I can tell you that the report that we will produce will go to Government and the Government will make a response to that. We expect a proper response if they don't take up our recommendations entirely. We can address that further, be it through our work as Members of Parliament or indeed perhaps in our roles in organisations such the all-party parliamentary groups. There are ways of putting pressure on the Government, and we will certainly do that. Like you, we are certainly very passionate about the environment, and that is why we are members of the Environmental Audit Select Committee, but we should thank you as well not only for your time, but also for your passion and commitment for the subject and the fact that you spend your time engaging, researching, working, speaking and having a dialogue with other people—not only your local councillors, but also members of the public, so we certainly thank you for that as well.

As I mentioned earlier, I know that in your submission you stated that the South East Climate Alliance submission said that, at present, "local authorities have little chance of driving the level of change needed to meet the global emergency". How did you and your members come to that conclusion?

**Dr Barnard:** How did we come to the conclusion? From what we saw all around us.

**Geoff Barnard:** Let me have a crack. Sally has been co-ordinating a process of trying to keep track of what is happening across climate action plans in the whole area, 56 different local authorities, so has been working late at night scouring the internet to find where those plans are and to see what is happening in reports on websites. Also we have been e-mailing and contacting every council, contacting green groups in as many council areas as well to say, "Okay, you have declared an emergency. You have passed this motion. What is going on?" We are keeping the best tabs we can on what is happening.

Some of the headlines are in our submission. Reading the overview of this, there are some great examples of progress, but there are a hell of a lot more examples of not very much going on. That is the evidence in front of us, and unless things are happening that we do not know about, which we kind of hope is the case, there is a pattern of underachievement, and things are yet to really get going. That is the answer to the question. It is quite a clear pattern: the gulf between the frontrunners and laggards is enormous.

**Q101 Chair:** That does answer the question, and I think that is quite a qualitative approach to this issue. I am sure that you probably have other contacts with different groups outside of the south-east. Have they come to similar conclusions as you have?



**Geoff Barnard:** We are in quite close touch with the UK Climate Emergency organisation, which is just kicking off a country-wide monitoring system to assess the quality of different plans. Yes, the answer is true. We see this gulf between the leaders and the laggards across the country. One of the things that we try to do is pick up on case studies of frontrunners, to share them with everybody to try to help others pick up. It is a bit strange for a bunch of volunteers to be running one of the most comprehensive websites on the subject that is trying to do this. It would be nice to see this being led by some national organisations, making a really good fist of it.

Q102 **Chair:** As I said, we are very grateful for the work you have undertaken, and it has been possible through the use of the internet, but it is a great resource and research tool. You seem to have focused on local authorities. Do you think they are the main organisations or bodies to achieve net zero, or do you think there are other stakeholders who should be involved?

**Dr Barnard:** It is not clear to us, from a community perspective, who else it would be. When we became so frustrated about trying to get things done in our own communities, the first people we thought of to try to influence were our local councils. I do not know who else we would go to. It seems apparent to us that they are the people to help. As my friend said the other day, "Well, they sort out the bins; they need to sort out climate change."

**Geoff Barnard:** It has been a real learning curve for us to understand what local authorities do. The vast majority of people I know really do not have much clue about this, and we have learned fast. We have a much better idea now. Our conclusion that local authorities are crucial has strengthened at every turn. The way I feel about it is if they are not part of the solution, they are going to be part of the problem. Climate change is so woven into almost every decision that a council makes. If you are not putting it centre stage as you make those decisions, you are going to be missing opportunities; you are going to be slowing the whole process. They have to be central—flaws, warts and all. There is no way around this.

**Dr Barnard:** Through all this action that has been happening, and through trying to engage with our local councils, there has been a real flourishing of local democracy in action for most of us who had no idea how our councils work. We are trying to engage with them, with greater and lesser success. If they can manage to welcome us in, as some do, that will be a huge benefit to us all and will strengthen the democratic system, and it is strengthening it already. We can unite around this common goal of trying to sort out climate change together, because action has to happen in our homes, it has to happen at local authority level, in regional and national Government, and we all have to be talking about it.



The big conversations have to happen, and at the moment it feels we are often shying away from them. The amount you hear it mentioned does not reflect the scale of the crisis that we are facing and the urgency, and that is why we are all getting frustrated and anxious. As a GP I see people getting quite depressed about it. I can feel myself getting depressed. Yes, let's all get on with it. We can do this together. Local councils are right in the middle. That is where we are going to try to get action. You all, and everybody—the Government—needs to help that happen. Make policies flow, because at the moment it feels like local authorities are swimming upstream. They keep meeting obstructions in the policies and things. It all needs to flow. The policies need to flow to enable and help us all to get on with it.

**Q103 Cherilyn Mackrory:** Welcome. Thank you for coming this afternoon. You have mentioned policy, and we often hear about “Government funding”. Taking those two terms out of this, what changes do you think would make a practical difference to the ability of local authorities to act effectively on net zero?

**Dr Barnard:** The things that would make a difference if they were really working effectively—in some cases they are making good progress—are that the council would be communicating to us all loud and clear about climate change. The climate action plan would not be tucked away in the depths of their website, which it often is at the moment. You really have to search to find some of them, and with some of them you can put a search for “climate” in and nothing comes up. There are a few that are starting to feature climate sustainability on the front page of their websites. Surrey Heath did that. That is really impressive. You can see the council cares about it. That is the first thing: communication—you can find the action plan easily, and you can understand it. Some of them are a bit lost in papers somewhere, but some are really well communicated and put over.

It is important that climate and nature are taken into account in every decision that the council makes, so that we are not confused by something going ahead, like a new road being built that seems to fly in the face of what should be happening. The council has divested their pension fund from fossil fuels, because that is increasingly feeling like a huge anomaly. As you know, there is a lot of campaigning going on, because that does seem to be a huge anomaly. It is important that websites are inspiring and that you can find the information, you can find out how to get help and, if you want to get something going on your community, you can find the right person to help you.

Then we need to know how we are doing. We need to have reporting back on how we are getting on, in a way we can all understand. If you think about the Covid crisis, you can click on your phone and you can see a map of the figures across the country. I know that is not easy for climate change, and it would be very, very complicated, but it will help people to see how their council is getting on. I am sure, in a couple of



years, that will happen, but we just need to get there. They are welcoming community groups in.

**Q104 Cherilyn Mackrory:** We have heard this afternoon that it is difficult to make comparisons often between council areas, because they are very different by nature. We have heard from you just now about what they need to do. How could Government potentially—apart from funding, because everyone always says money—assist local councils to achieve that?

**Geoff Barnard:** This concept of coherent policy frameworks is absolutely crucial. I will give you one example around the area of building standards. Two or three years ago in the town of Steyning, where we live, I was involved in writing a climate paper for our neighbourhood plan. Everybody around the room was really keen on making this as ambitious as possible. But we held back from writing a policy that had any bite to it, because we were anxious that it would get thrown out at the district level, because the district did not have a policy that said the same thing. Three years later the district plan is being considered, and they are in exactly the same dilemma: they want to be ambitious, but they are worried about it being thrown out, and they are nervous about the whole thing. It is crazy.

Just think how much easier it would be if there was a coherent framework, as discussed earlier, that just flows down. The job of everybody down that chain is easier—the job of the builder who is trying to figure out whether to send his apprentice on a course to learn about insulation or heat pumps. It is a no-brainer. Right now you are taking a chance, if you are a local builder, to train up one of your employees. In fact, a building firm that did some retrofit work for us was absolutely apoplectic when the Greenhands grant was finally canned, because he had spent tens of thousands getting his folks trained up on that. That just cannot happen, and that would not happen if there was a coherent, long-term framework, and everybody was onboard, and this was not a football that we are kicking around.

**Q105 Jerome Mayhew:** You were sitting at the back for the first panel, which is great. You heard quite a lot of discussion about local authority climate action plans. I took a note of what Councillor Blake said about the rationale—the reason they are important. From my own rather poor handwriting I can decipher that the first reason she gave was it was a demonstration of commitment. The second one was that it was community connection work. It is all about engaging and communication. I think there was one that I missed, but the last one was that it informed a needs assessment for funding. From my perspective, I went straight to, “It is a plan. It is all about the technical details” of what was later described as “what is behind the curtain”, with the tap dancer rather memorably being out at the front.

From your perspective, do you agree that one of the most important aspects of these plans is to provide, I do not want to say reassurance,



because that is slightly patronising in a way, but engagement—addressing some of the anxiety and even the depression that really involved people are experiencing?

**Dr Barnard:** Yes, I think they really can. I have a good example that I can share with you, just to demonstrate that. It is Adur and Worthing Council, which is down the road from our council. They started off with a thorough citizens' assembly. They got a clear mandate for some of the difficult decisions, then they worked out the shared climate and nature plan. This was their huge list of different community groups they engage with, including some of the utilities, like Southern Water, sports groups, green groups, and local businesses. They got them onboard, and this allowed them to look at the whole council area, rather than just their council estate. Some councils are just looking at their own estate, but this is looking at the whole of the area of Adur and Worthing.

Then they worked it out into a plan, and it set out specific actions that the council committed to take, and specific actions that the community committed to take, very clearly, and they are all there. One is the council, and one is the community. It goes into a lot of detail, and it has dates set when they will have it done by. In that way, you have buy-in from a huge section of the community that is committing to do something. They know what they have to do. They know what their role is. They can feel they are getting on with it.

Q106 **Jerome Mayhew:** Can I interject there? You said they get community buy-in. In my area, there are some people like you who are very committed, and there are an awful lot of people for whom politics is not their No. 1 priority and they just get on with their lives. There is a vast range of approaches. Do you think that something like a citizens' committee is effective, not in talking to the people who are really committed, because they are already in the bag, but for the other 95%? Or do you think they think, "Oh, it is a climate assembly. Oh, that is just XR winding us up again"? I have a problem with my view of XR, because, very substantially in my neck of the woods, it is not a positive force. That is just my view. It puts everyone else off. How do you engage? Do you have any insight on how you can deal with the 95%?

**Geoff Barnard:** It is good question, and in the case of Adur and Worthing they did the citizens' assembly using a proper survey approach. They made a point of bringing in people of all ilks and views to start with. For those that listened to the final result, that was really convincing. Clearly there is a portion of our audience out there who are not going to listen to any of this stuff; they are not going to read anything the council sends on anything. For them, they will not have much chance to input into a climate plan, and probably it is a good thing, because they are not the people to ask. But the people who are most likely to be able to advise the council on how to reach those groups are their neighbours, not some policy wonks in London. That community buy-in to address that challenge is your best way of cracking it.



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In the group that I help run in Steyning, we are thinking about this all the time: how do we use our stand in the farmer's market to get people to talk about something they do not normally talk about? Retrofit is not the sexiest subject in the world. We have an old, archaic doll's house that used to be somebody's father's. We bring it out, and we are retrofitting every month, putting on some little sewn-on solar panels, just to try to get that conversation going. That is one of the weapons we have in this with working with local community groups.

**Jerome Mayhew:** I know we are running out of time, but one of the most impressive bits of evidence we have received in the last year that has really stuck in my mind is when one of our experts was asked, "How do we get people involved?" They said, "The single most effective way of getting people involved is for them to take one step. Take one action that has a climate or environmental impact, and it ignites their own interest." I am going to stop there, because I know I have run out of time, but thank you very much.

Q107 **Claudia Webbe:** Thank you for joining us. It is great to see you. It would be easy to ask what success looks like, but I want to know, from your perspective, what indicators and outcomes demonstrate to you in your alliance the positive change that has occurred as a result of action by local authorities.

**Geoff Barnard:** Let me just whiz through a few headlines here. I think clear evidence that the council gets it, tangible evidence that they get it—ambitious plans and targets, evidence they are actually walking the walk and doing stuff, evidence that they are engaging with stakeholders, and not just us, but others too, and that they are doing it in an open and honest way. So many of the conversations that groups like us have are councils trying to big up the one thing they are doing, because they do not want to talk about the 99 things they have not got around to. We need to have an honest conversation. We would like to see them fulfil the nascent, latent leadership role that they take from time to time, and can take much more. That could be in many different formats, but I think the last bit is the thing that ties it together. They have to be talking about it. If you are not communicating constantly on this, people will not believe they are really on it. At the moment, there is no sense that a lot of the councils are really on it.

**Dr Barnard:** We need to see action. We need to see new things appearing. In Worthing they are establishing a kelp forest off the coast, which will help biodiversity, but will also capture carbon. You have to see new things. Unless we see big actions happening, we are not getting anywhere. I would say that is the biggest thing. In a way, almost nothing matters if we have the actions happening.

**Chair:** It is very exciting to hear about the kelp forest. That is an innovative idea for addressing climate change.

Thank you for coming along. It has been very helpful to gain your



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perspective of where you see the problems are and how you see they should be addressed. It is very interesting, in terms of the work you have done across all those local authorities, to see who has taken this issue onboard and who has not. That is a great help. Perhaps we could even have a picture of your doll's house. We may be able to use it in our report.

**Geoff Barnard:** We are on it. We are knitting some heat pumps as we speak.

**Chair:** Fantastic. Thank you for coming along today. We greatly appreciate the work you have done, and your taking an interest in what we are doing here as well.