

Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Local government and the path to net zero, HC 34

Monday 13 September 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Ian Byrne; Brendan Clarke-Smith; Florence Eshalomi; Ben Everitt; Rachel Hopkins; Andrew Lewer; Mary Robinson; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 103 - 167

Witnesses

[I](#): Xavier Brice, CEO, Sustrans; Professor Janette Webb, University of Edinburgh, EnergyREV; and Richard Blyth, Head of Policy Practice and Research, Royal Town Planning Institute.

[II](#): Councillor Peter Schwier, Climate Czar, Essex County Council; Nick Hibberd, Executive Director, Economy, Environment and Culture, Brighton and Hove Council; and Councillor Sarah Rouse, Enhancing Quality of Life Board Member, District Councils' Network.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Xavier Brice, Professor Janette Webb and Richard Blyth.

Q103 **Chair:** Welcome, everyone, to this afternoon's session of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee. This afternoon we are looking at the important issue of local government and the path to net zero.

To begin with, I will ask members of the committee to put on record any interests they may have that are relevant to this inquiry. I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association. I will go around the room and members can indicate.

Mary Robinson: I employ a councillor in my staff team.

Ian Byrne: I am still a sitting councillor in Liverpool.

Rachel Hopkins: I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association and I employ a councillor in my office.

Ben Everitt: Nothing from me.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: Chair, I have councillors in my office.

Andrew Lewer: Chair, in addition to the register of interests, I am a vice-president of the LGA.

Chair: Okay. Now over to the important people today, our witnesses. Thank you very much for joining us. I will come over to our two witnesses in the room first of all. Xavier Brice?

Xavier Brice: Thank you, Chair. I am the chief executive of Sustrans, which is a national UK charity that makes it easy for people to work and cycle, working with communities, national Government and local government.

Richard Blyth: I am head of policy for the Royal Town Planning Institute. We have 26,000 members in professional practice in the UK, Ireland and overseas.

Professor Webb: I am sorry I cannot be there in person. I would prefer that. I am at the University of Edinburgh. I am a social scientist who has done and continues to do research on the role of local authorities and localities in energy systems transition.

Q104 **Chair:** Thank you, all three of you, for coming today. Everyone knows that the challenge of getting to net zero is important. It is important that we meet it. Xavier, how important is it that local authorities play a role in this and do they have the powers and responsibilities they need to make a significant contribution?



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Xavier Brice: Definitely. It is vital on the topics of both transport and planning. To deal with transport first, transport is the single biggest contributor of CO₂ and of general greenhouse gas emissions in the UK. It has recently become the single biggest contributor. It has also remained stubbornly high over the past 25 years. Councils have power over transport, especially local transport and the local road network, and road emissions are the single biggest contributor to those emissions.

Then in planning terms, of course, local government has quite considerable powers of planning. Planning is a key thing that drives demand for transport. It determines the journeys we make. In that sense, local government is well placed to deal with the trips we all make and have to make. There are many examples that we can go into of the positive impact that many local authorities are having across the UK already.

Q105 **Chair:** That is an intro for you, Richard. Planning has certainly been mentioned as a key issue in terms of local authorities' powers.

Richard Blyth: Yes, both over the location of development—whether we will be encouraging car-dependent development—and also, when you get to it, how it is designed and whether the design of development is to encourage the use of active travel rather than private travel.

But there are issues around, first of all, the constraints provided by national policy, which places housing delivery front and centre above all other considerations, and then also the resources in local authorities. Last year, in the spending review, we asked for £500 million to be spent over four years on the English planning system, of which £67 million to deliver one full-time equivalent planner to work exclusively on the climate change aspects of the planning brief.

Q106 **Chair:** You are still asking?

Richard Blyth: We got a little bit of money for design, which was welcome.

Q107 **Chair:** Professor Webb?

Professor Webb: Yes, I agree that it is critical that our UK local governments play a role in meeting our net zero targets. They can be extremely constructive and effective contributors to that. The research we have done focuses particularly on their role in relation to the decarbonisation of heat and improved energy efficiency of buildings. That is an excellent opportunity as well for UK government to build on that because this is an area that is hard for central governments to tackle. It is fair to say you cannot do the decarbonisation of heat from Whitehall and Westminster. It needs that element of local planning and local delivery. That is a great opportunity.

But again, I agree. There are too few resources for local authorities typically to manage to deliver their ambitions.



Q108 **Chair:** To follow up that issue with you, Richard Blyth has already mentioned planning. Generally, local authorities may have the interest and they may have the desire, but do they actually have the funds to deliver it? There has been a lot of talk about the need for a framework for local authorities to act within and to be clear what they should be doing and to make sure it all joins together on a national basis. Is the funding there? Is the framework there?

Professor Webb: No. There is insufficient funding and insufficient capability and capacity at present for local authorities to do a systematic job across the board in relation to heat, energy efficiency, transport, planning, spatial development and land use development. The resources are thinly spread. We have seen in our research over the last decade plans being shrunk back rather than advanced in many cases, though I have to say there are some impressive examples that I can give later of where local authorities have made significant changes using all the available funding and powers at their disposal.

I agree. A clear framework policy mandate directed around net zero is a critical part of the future.

Q109 **Chair:** Richard Blyth was nodding away vigorously as you were speaking. Richard, do you want to follow up on that?

Richard Blyth: Yes. One critical question is the area over which you plan. We in the RTPI are very much in favour of district councils working together on these kinds of issues, particularly climate change, and also issues around flooding, which we have not mentioned so far but is a critical aspect of climate change. Rivers do not necessarily follow administrative boundaries, for example.

Also, I have noticed that there can tend to be, in larger city authorities such as Glasgow and Stockport, more activity. This may be partly to do with economies of scale. We certainly encourage cross-boundary working through an idea called green growth boards, which is how some of these climate issues such as housing and transport and indeed nature recovery can be considered in a joined-up way.

Q110 **Chair:** Xavier, do you want to come in on this issue of funding and a framework? Even with what they have, are local authorities doing enough?

Xavier Brice: There are two sides of the funding. If you take the example of active travel, walking and cycling, we are starting to see substantial sums of money come online now from central government for local government.

The challenge is often local authorities' ability to spend that, having the revenue funding, because the history of that funding has been stop-start on an annual basis. That is no way to plan or deliver important infrastructure. Also, it is hard to retain that expertise in-house when you do not know whether you will get funding next year.



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It is great to see capital funding come online. That now needs to be made multiyear so that local authorities can plan and implement it effectively, which we are not seeing yet and are hoping to see in the spending review. Then, within that, you need to ensure sufficient revenue funding so that local authorities are not entirely dependent upon consultants and, where they do need to use consultants, have the ability to sponsor and manage that in-house and see this important infrastructure through.

Q111 Chair: Finally from me before I move on, can we measure what local authorities are achieving? There seems to be a plethora of good resolutions from councils about when they will hit net zero. Many of them are not backed up by very much evidence that they have a plan in place to do it and any measures that show whether it has been achieved.

Xavier Brice: I suppose there are two aspects to that question. The first is the wider challenge of net zero and overall carbon emissions, which is a challenge nationally of course as well in terms of measuring that. Specifically it is possible to measure the impact and to measure the progress towards it, either through direct metrics around carbon saved or through looking at increases in cycling and walking and a reduction in road traffic. It is there but, again, the area requires sufficient funding, resource and focus to put those frameworks in place and ensure consistency across the UK.

Richard Blyth: Last year we published a study into how to monitor planning across five national jurisdictions. In each country, one of the problems was that there did tend to be an enthusiasm for measuring what you can measure—like the speed at which planning applications were processed—but not so much developed capacity in relation to the outcomes, like whether emissions have been reduced, whether more people have been housed and whether more people are able to access funding. I did notice looking through best practice this morning that Stockport does include in its annual monitoring reports monitoring on its carbon plan, so there is good practice. But one difficulty is that the people who do the monitoring are often the first to let go if you have a problem with keeping your staff numbers up.

Professor Webb: Absolutely, I agree with that last point. We have seen that happening.

I will give a direct example from some of the work we have done. We looked at the value of European Local Energy Assistance or ELENA programme money. Local authorities across the UK had grants worth €23 million from that programme over a period of years to develop their own in-house teams, technically capable of delivering energy projects, planning, managing, costing and so on. That €23 million in grant funding let to €859 million in investments in local energy, predominantly in England but also in Wales. We argue that that shows the huge value of quite limited grant funding there to draw significant investment in clean energy at local authority scale.



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Chair: We will come on to energy among other issues shortly. Mary Robinson, do you have a supplementary on this?

Q112 **Mary Robinson:** Thank you, Chair. Richard, you mentioned Stockport Council and of course, being the Cheadle Member of Parliament, I am in Stockport Borough.

The issue of flooding and councils working together is pertinent. For instance, Stockport sits on the River Mersey catchment area and there are a lot of MPs and councillors along that way. The River Severn Partnership has MPs and local authorities and utilities companies working together.

Is there a case for bodies to be wider than just local government to tackle this issue and to be more formalised in their nature?

Richard Blyth: We certainly agree that the proposed green growth boards should include, for example, water companies, hopefully transport providers and organisations such as the Environment Agency. We think they are best organised in a non-statutory way partly because you do need to have the right people around the table and that may vary slightly depending on whether you are within the Mersey or the Severn, for example.

Chair: Thank you. Moving on to transport issues, which have already been mentioned but now in detail, Ian Byrne, over to you.

Q113 **Ian Byrne:** Thank you. Xavier, we have heard about the range of measures local government is taking to reduce emissions, including encouraging active travel, improving bus services, disincentivising car usage with policies such as clean air zones, and facilitating the switch to EVs through the installation of charging points. You touched on the importance of transport in reaching net zero and we also know that air pollution hits the poorest the hardest.

In contributing to net zero, what are the most important tools available to local authorities and do you have any examples of best practice?

Xavier Brice: Local authorities already have powers and things they can do. In terms of short, local trips, walking or cycling can realistically substitute for over 40% of existing short car trips under 3 miles, which would save nearly 5% of CO₂ emissions from all car travel. Local authorities can develop local cycling and walking infrastructure plans, which, going back to my previous comment, moved away from a piecemeal approach to thinking about how to plan and deliver for walking and cycling and deliver plans that can then be acted on over time as the funding becomes available.

There are across the country good examples of those and authorities that have made good progress. Leicester would be one urban example. Leicester has made its town centre highly permeable for people walking or cycling or coming by public transport, making it harder to drive



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through. They reclaimed carpark space and found buried kings in the process. They have made the town centre vibrant and also, through that, have encouraged foot traffic, so it is good for business as well.

A lot of the time it is about making it easy for people to walk or cycle and that can mean making it harder for people to drive, but it is also reversing 50 years of policy geared towards making it easier for people to drive, Leicester being a prime example.

I would also use a rural example, Suffolk, which made good use of its emergency active travel funding and put in place measures to make it safer and easier for people to walk and cycle on country lanes. They have also put in modal filters, again, to make it easy for people to walk and cycle and access areas by walking and cycling and at times, yes, harder for people to access places by car. That is important because often the sense is that this is purely an urban thing, but it is not. There are things that councils with larger rural constituencies can do as well. There are definitely powers there.

Of course, local authorities have power over roads and, when new roads are proposed that will bed in car dependency and encourage more traffic, which for the immediate future and beyond will produce CO₂ emissions, to question that and halt that and instead to ensure that the default is not assuming that people will get around by car but looking to see how to plan so that people can get around by public transport, walking or cycling, so prioritising cycling and walking in planning as well.

Richard Blyth: I would like to add to that the possibility for local authorities to reregulate buses, which is happening in Mary's part of the world. I know most about new development rather than the existing use of transport, but the worrying fact came out of the Transport for New Homes study, published in 2018, that substantial new developments are being built on the edge of towns with little joining up between a development which may be well designed and other public transport routes. That report expressed the concern about the difficulty the planners have in trying to bring about the changes beyond the red-line boundary of the site that may be essential. Otherwise, you can create a kind of bubble. I am thinking of an example like Barton in Oxford, where you have to cross the Oxford bypass and it is difficult to get to that from the development. It is not just about where you put them but how you link them to other existing public transport routes that are in use.

I am afraid my good practice is not from the UK but from Houghton in the Netherlands, which designed two new railway stations as integrated transport interchanges at the core of a network of cycling and walking routes. By contrast, the Transport for New Homes study could find only one development at all recently that had been built around a new station, Cranbrook in East Devon, which already had overcrowding on its hourly service into Exeter because the station did not have sufficient capacity



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and was quite a long way from the existing village. It is not only about the site but also about how you link that into existing transport networks.

Q114 **Ian Byrne:** Excellent. Janette, did you want to add anything?

Professor Webb: No, that has been well covered.

Q115 **Ian Byrne:** Moving on, the Government recently announced £2 billion—you touched on that before—for walking and cycling infrastructure. Is that enough for the agency that will actually operate it?

Xavier Brice: The easy answer is no, but I go back to what I said earlier on funding. The key is to have stability and to know what is coming. The reality is that that funding will need to go up in the years to come, but it is important to spend that money well. To do that, local authorities need to know with certainty that it will be coming—it is still not confirmed and we are hoping to see it confirmed in the spending review—and then also to ensure sufficient revenue funding as well.

That is not about suddenly an avalanche of funding for local authorities. It is allowing local authorities to build up teams that have been cut or that were never there. Of course, this is a big change. This is about putting walking and cycling on the same footing as our national highways and our rail with five-year control periods or five-year investment periods. Treating active travel with that gravity, that degree of focus and also that degree of resource is important.

Yes, undoubtedly, we will need to see higher spending over the years to come as this becomes a more integral part of our transport network. But equally, we need to ensure that that money can be spent well and learn from the emergency active travel fund. For obvious reasons, that money was made available quickly and had to be spent quickly, which also results in sometimes schemes going in without everyone being consulted and local people do not get involved in the way that often they would like to and need to. Certainly one of the learnings from the emergency active travel fund is that overall there will need to be more money, but the key is multiyear funding, multiyear certainty and revenue alongside it.

The last point I would make on that is the importance of maintenance. Currently local authorities receive no separate funding for maintenance of cycleways, for example. Again, to ensure that once it is in it can be properly maintained and does not fall into disrepair, there will be a need to ensure that cycleways and footways of course are properly maintained and that local authorities have the funding to do that.

Q116 **Ian Byrne:** With the correct level of funding in the long term?

Xavier Brice: Completely.

Q117 **Ian Byrne:** Janette, would you like add anything to that?

Professor Webb: No, I would reinforce that point, particularly about the continuity of funding. We have had a lot of feedback from local



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government saying that that stop-start pattern of funding is part of the difficulty in maintaining and building on action.

Q118 **Ian Byrne:** Thank you. Richard?

Richard Blyth: I will also add that one of the difficulties with the competitive funding mechanisms and the different pots is that you may well find that the relatively well-resourced authorities can hire the people who can write good bids. If you add to that the planning White Paper last year, which was talking about moving more of the cost of running the planning system onto the shoulders of developers and away from taxpayers, there again the parts of the countries with high land values can then fund some better kinds of local authorities. But in a sense climate is about climate justice and it is no respecter of prosperity, so some of the poorest local authorities with the lowest land values would be struggling in a situation where they needed to depend on developers through a tax on planning applications to fund this kind of activity.

Q119 **Ian Byrne:** Excellent point. It goes against the levelling-up agenda. Coming on to some of the temporary funding that was in place, how do we ensure that councils can build on the temporary provision that was given during the pandemic and produce payment schemes for active travel infrastructure?

Xavier Brice: One of the most important things is local leadership. We have seen strong local leadership across all political colours and across the country—that is so important and that has ever been the case—and continued strong local leadership from politicians and also engagement in the community.

We know from the Department for Transport's own research as well as other independent research that the majority of people support the types of schemes that are going in. One would not always gather that from some of the press coverage but the evidence shows—and I am happy to pass that on to the committee afterwards—that a majority of people support these schemes. But it is important that communities are consulted because, of course, for disabled people, to use one example, and for many people, all of these schemes need to be properly planned out so that they do serve everyone.

That does not mean everyone will always be happy, of course. We have seen some excellent schemes go in and it is easy to feel disheartened, from my position, by some of the schemes coming out. But also, it is important to remember that some of these schemes were trialled and therefore they will not all become permanent, but certainly many will.

Going back to the competitive point that Richard made and the resourcing point, people are at the mercy of whether or not their local authority submitted a good grant or not. There is something here about ensuring that this is spread across the UK and serves everyone, not just



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those local authorities that are well resourced and well experienced in putting in high-quality bids.

Q120 Ian Byrne: To follow up on that, certainly we have had issues in Liverpool around a temporary scheme that caused congestion, but people wanted the scheme. Air pollution is an issue certainly in Liverpool. How do we get over that mindset of 50 years of car travel? For instance, in Liverpool, right opposite my office, when the main artery into the football grounds went down to one lane, it was causing huge issues because of the travel lane. We need correctly planned permanent infrastructure. I have had the benefit of speaking to the local community and that was missing on some of the temporary schemes. How do we get around that?

Xavier Brice: I suppose there are two things. There is the practical point of ensuring that people are involved in that and have their say. That is an important point when talking about net zero. Only on Friday the People's Climate Assembly met in this building, reconvening after the Covid hiatus, and the CO of the Climate Change Committee was talking about how he was sceptical about the value of it but actually learned so much from the input of people. The proper engagement of people does take time but it is important because we then get a better outcome.

The second point, though, is a wider one around change. If you put a scheme in, the change does not happen overnight and it can be disruptive. But if you use the example of Waltham Forest in London where a Mini Holland scheme, as it was known, was put into a low-traffic neighbourhood, initially opinion of local residents was fairly evenly divided around whether it was a good thing or not. Asked a year later whether anyone would want to go back to how it was, less than 2% of residents said they would.

It takes time for change to bed in. It takes time for behaviours to change. There is lots of evidence. That is in general around change, but especially when it comes to changing people's habits and changing traffic movements.

Richard Blyth: I agree with Xavier about the issue of public engagement. Is this a flash in the pan for 2020 or is there long-term commitment? Cornwall has for some time been a centre of excellence for climate planning. The climate emergency development plan for Cornwall has policies covering the town centre, renewable energy, natural climate solutions, energy and sustainable construction, transport, community resilience, coastal change, flood management, agriculture—which is a key issue at the moment—and alternative living. They are thinking of the climate emergency across all of their activities as a unitary authority and indeed, as we were hearing from Mary also, connecting to non-local authority bodies to make sure all organisations pull together. But again, you do not do a plan like that if you think it will last only a year. This is community consultation across Cornwall.



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I particularly like that the plan acts as a framework for planning and climate change that can be echoed within Cornwall's extensive network of neighbourhood plans. It is a big local authority, so it has given a lot of power to towns and villages. Guidance has been developed by the neighbourhood plan team to help town and village councils do their plans and nest them within the overall climate emergency plan.

Q121 **Ian Byrne:** From a transport perspective, are we seeing that level of collaboration in national Government?

Richard Blyth: I have seen a lot of collaboration recently between the Housing Department in MHCLG and the Environment Department, DEFRA, but that is because I have been working a lot on the environment Bill. I cannot comment on the co-operation between DfT and MHCLG in terms of the last few months. Also, it is important to involve BEIS because that is the department responsible for climate change and energy.

You may come on to this in your question, but the content of the National Planning Policy Framework is key. I will leave that in case you want to return to it.

Q122 **Ian Byrne:** Janette, do you want to add anything?

Professor Webb: No, other than perhaps to re-emphasise the importance of having available, accessible, good public transport to offset that tendency to get in the car and drive somewhere and then build up the congestion.

Chair: Thanks, Ian. Moving on now to the planning issues that were mentioned, Andrew Lewer.

Q123 **Andrew Lewer:** Thank you, Chair. We have touched on planning a couple of times but are homing right in on it now. We have heard from everybody how planning is important to the UK to achieve net zero, but how can local authorities use their planning powers more effectively to reduce emissions?

Professor Webb: My research is on local energy, so I will talk about energy specifically. One critical way is to integrate local development planning with energy planning and for local authorities to work with the local distribution network operators—gas and electricity—in thinking about new developments and to work on how to introduce energy initiatives into capital development programmes. We have seen that the more successful and effective local authorities in terms of developing revenues from local energy assets are those that have managed to integrate those initiatives and energy project planning into that capital programme planning to put the pieces together, to collaborate across the different departments and services in local government and then to secure the local revenue streams from that investment.

Xavier Brice: The most fundamental thing is localism and recognising that we need our services to be local. When we think about travel, we



often think about the journey to work. Only 15% of journeys in the UK are commuting journeys or work journeys. They are not the majority of journeys that we make. We make journeys to take children to places, to do our shopping and to see people. There is something about ensuring that local transport and land use planning is joined up so that the majority of journeys that we make can be made ideally on foot or by bike or by public transport.

This is not reserved for those who live in inner cities. This is eminently possible. The assumption that everyone will get somewhere via car is relatively recent in developmental terms, over the last 50 years or so. There is a lot of talk about 15-minute neighbourhoods or 20-minute neighbourhoods. We are increasingly seeing local governments and devolved governments starting to adopt this, most recently in Scotland, for example. Adopting the 20-minute neighbourhood concept is a central principle of the planning system, which means that most of what you need—not everything—could be found within a 10-minute walk. That can apply to rural areas as well. Again, this is not some sort of hipster loft-based dream for inner cities. That is an important point.

It is also worth remembering that only 20% of households in the UK do not have access to a car. There is an equalities angle here. It is about ensuring new developments are designed in ways that do not perpetuate car dependency and enable people to walk and cycle to get to what they need.

Richard Blyth: Local authorities are quite constrained by national planning policy and resources, but it does not mean that they are absolutely constrained. Definitely, working together across boundaries is hugely helpful.

There is a question around whether the skills and knowledge gap within the planning profession has been fully addressed. As we were hearing, this is all new material. Our study published in March about opportunities for collaboration among local authority departments pointed out that it would be helpful if there was more training available to planners, the ability to take up training and enough time off the day job to get better skills.

I was impressed with our example from Glasgow, from before Covid, which talked about 61 recommendations for the city to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030, which is important if they are going to host COP 26. I noticed that the spatial planning manager at Glasgow City Council recognised that planning will be key to delivering these recommendations. They set up a climate liaison group with colleagues from roads, environment, health, energy, planning, housing regeneration and so on to write their emergency and delivery plans. Even if you are constrained in the number of people in your team, you can undertake these cross-department activities.

Q124 **Andrew Lewer:** We have touched briefly on rural areas. The written



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submission from Sustrans said you wanted the Government to embed the National Cycle Network into the NPPF. How would that take place from Sustrans? Also, what are your reflections more generally on development in rural areas? How can that genuinely be sustainable? Should the focus instead be on making cities denser?

Xavier Brice: Sustrans is the custodian of the National Cycle Network, which is a 12,000-mile strategic walking and cycling network that spans the whole UK. It is used more for walking than cycling and everyday journeys as well, not just for leisure. It has no status currently but we think it should be embedded into the National Planning Policy Framework and recognised so that it can be strengthened. It is used by millions of people currently.

On the more general point around rural development, certainly increased densification is vital. In terms of rural networks, to the point Richard made earlier, there are ways to make rural development more sustainable. Again, the starting assumption cannot be that people will then get in a car to go out and get a loaf of bread or a pint of milk if they need to. It is going back to thinking about the services being provided. Are we seeing sufficient mixed-use development? Monocultural housing estates on the edge of a village will drive vast amounts of car traffic for those trips to goods and services. There is a point about ensuring that education, shops and other services are included as part of that development and about mixed-use development, going back to that concept of the 20-minute neighbourhood, because not everybody in rural areas has a car either. That can be a significant driver of rural poverty.

Then there is also the point about provision of bus services—it is well known what has happened to rural bus services over the last 20 years—and then of course locating development where there are existing or where there could be railway stations.

Richard Blyth: As you know, the issue of planning reform is certainly poised over me. We are waiting for the Government to respond to the consultation on the planning White Paper published last August.

Of relevance to this debate is what kinds of sites get advanced in local plans. One question that can be of concern is when local authorities do a call for sites. A lot of landowners are keen to see their sites allocated in local plans. They could be big sites and they may be quite difficult sites to access. But the pressure on local authorities is to get the housing numbers delivered according to the housing delivery test and their allocation in the housing formula.

I am concerned if that leads to adopting less sustainable locations because it is easier to deliver housing in large quantities like that rather than with the fine grain of cities and towns. That could be a problem in relation to ensuring that we do not continue to replicate carbon car-dependent development.



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We do a study regularly—we are just about to finish the last one—called “Location of Development”. We look at the location of all the housing permissions. Our latest data is 2012 to 2017. At that time, roughly only half of planning permissions were well located in relation to public transport and that was before some of the current pressures on housing numbers. We are doing a new study we will be publishing later this year. I will be looking carefully to see whether there has been a change in that 50% and if it has got worse, but certainly speed may not always be the best friend of sustainability.

Professor Webb: I am not sure I have a great deal explicitly to say because I am not a planning expert here, but in general the carbon accounting shows that building up in existing urban areas is more effective than spreading yet further development on greenfield sites, and certainly to find ways to incentivise the use of already urbanised land and areas of development rather than letting those areas decline and finding ways of integrating them back into prosperous urban settlements.

Q125 **Andrew Lewer:** To some people listening in to this today take an interest in the subject, a lot of the messaging may come across as quite relentless anti-car. Is there a concern from all three of the panellists that too much anti-car messaging will put people off the broader net zero message? How does the development of particularly electric cars but maybe hydrogen-powered cars as well alter this dynamic in that the pollution concerns arising from the internal combustion engine may come to be eased in the future by those new forms of propulsion?

Xavier Brice: I would not describe it as being anti-car. For a start, the car cannot be un-invented. I own a car. I use my car. It is more about car dependency. It is when one is faced with having no choice but to use a car. That cuts off a huge part of economic opportunity and quality of life to the 20% of households across the UK without access to a car. Then the impact that car travel has is beyond CO₂. It is not CO₂ that is shown to be a contributor to asthma, for example, but the air pollution coming from NOx emissions, which also come from tyre wear. Congestion has a role with the damage that does to local economies. There are reasons to move away from car-dependency beyond carbon, which is an important point, but it is not about being anti-car. It is about ensuring that people have choices that are not just getting in a car and that are just as easy, which is why we talk about making it easy for people to walk and cycle or easy to use public transport.

On the wider question of electric vehicles, the first point to make is that the other disbenefits of car dependency and congestion apply no matter what powers the vehicle. The impact of congestion on sense of community, on economic growth comes also from an electric car or a hydrogen car.

Then on the specific question of carbon and net zero, modelling suggests that we need to reduce private vehicle use between 20% and 60% by 2030 if we are to meet the net zero targets in addition to moving to



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electric cars because of the speed of adoption. If we are relying on electric cars to get us to the net zero target, that alone will not do it.

Then of course it is a fact that traffic demand growth from the planned roads investment strategy could add 20 million tonnes of CO₂ to UK emissions by 2032, which would negate 80% of the benefit arising from the switch to electric vehicles on that strategic road network.

Electric vehicles are an important part of the mix in the overall change, but they will only partially help us get to net zero. The danger is excessive reliance on electric vehicles as being the saving thing will actually lead to increased driving and increased emissions. The evidence shows that in Norway, which has one of the highest penetration of electric vehicles in the world, driving has gone up because it is guilt-free driving with all the other adverse consequences of it.

Q126 **Andrew Lewer:** Do you propose a reduction in car use by 2030 of between 20% and 60%?

Xavier Brice: Sorry, no, it is not what we are proposing. It is what modelling suggests we need to see to reach net zero. We need to see that level of reduction in private vehicle use together with a switch to electric vehicles to achieve climate change targets. The 20% to 60% range depends on how fast you believe you will get adoption of electric vehicles.

Richard Blyth: I very much concur. We published a "Net Zero Transport" report at the beginning of this year and we did it in a step way. I do not know if any of you are familiar with the waste hierarchy: reuse, reduce. I ought to know the order.

We had a four-step process. The first is to ensure all new development is located and designed to generate no new transport emissions and ideally be carbon negative, so create whole new growth areas which act as carbon sinks. Step two is to reduce travel demand altogether through homeworking, digital services and local living as a core principle of new development. This could cut emissions by 14%. The third is to shift modes away from private vehicles to walking, cycling and public transport at a level substantially exceeding current UK best practice. This could reduce transport emissions by 13%. Step four, which you have referred to, is to switch remaining trips by private vehicles but also all public transport including rail in particular and freight to run on alternative fuels, including electric vehicles.

That would reduce transport emissions by 50%. We get to somewhere around 80% but with a multipath method. We are talking about a longer trajectory than 2030.

Professor Webb: I can add perhaps that our shift to online ordering of goods has also of course increased emissions from light vehicles, vans and so on, in urban areas particularly. We could systematise that more,



use local hubs, for instance, to deliver goods and then a unified service for local delivery, making use of shared vans, rather than every delivery company competing with each other.

Also, there are real and measurable social benefits from getting us all out of our cars and more onto our feet and interacting socially with each other, which we have seen from the Spaces for People initiatives in Edinburgh, where I live, for instance.

Chair: Okay. Moving on to energy issues, which we have touched on so far but in more detail, Rachel Hopkins.

Q127 **Rachel Hopkins:** Thank you, Chair. I will probably direct this more to Janette and Richard around energy. Could you first give a brief definition of a smart local energy system and a local heat network and then say what contribution they can make to net zero and also how important the role of local government is to their delivery?

Professor Webb: I will try. A few questions are embedded there. A smart local energy system is mostly not what we have at present, but the ambition in using that idea is to integrate heat, power, transport and storage at a local scale so that any locally generated and supplied available energy is used as efficiently, flexibly and affordably as possible.

An example of current integrated local energy systems comes from, for instance, combined heat and power with thermal storage perhaps in big water tanks that can be charged up with electricity or gas-fired combined heat and power, maybe also linking in electric vehicles and solar power.

But getting smarter, more flexible, wider-area energy systems relies on better digital platforms for data sharing across all of the energy users and suppliers and network operators in a particular defined area—it could be a region, it could be a more local neighbourhood area—so that all those users and suppliers have visibility about what energy is available to do what at what times. The aim is always to waste no energy and to make best use of all energy produced locally or regionally to help to balance supply and demand on that system with high levels of intermittent renewable electricity and hence to reduce the costs of the transition to clean energy across the whole system from local services and local contributions.

Two key things are driving this renewed interest in local energy systems and smarter energy systems at a local scale. The first is the sheer increase, perhaps to some extent unexpected increase, in renewable electricity supply connected to our lower-voltage distribution networks rather than to the high-voltage transmission networks. That is right across the board from wind turbines to solar farms to micro renewables and storage like solar PV on the roofs of buildings and batteries in homes behind the meter.



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A recent estimate, for instance—and I was surprised by this when I started looking at it—of the GB electricity generation mix suggests that just over a quarter of energy supply is connected to our distribution networks, which is quite high. We need to make best use of that locally, not constrain it off the grid.

The second factor pushing the interest in this is the high cost of switching all of our heating to electricity with gas central heating pretty much ubiquitous across Britain. We see the huge swings in demand for heat buffered by our well-developed gas grid. A gas grid provides a kind of storage and allows those peaks and troughs in demand to be managed. If we try to put all that load onto the electricity network, it will need major grid reinforcements and tower stations built to meet just peak demands, lying idle for much of the time, so an expensive proposition.

One solution then is using the locally available waste heat sources, including developing and connecting district heating networks to capture those local heat sources such as energy from waste, water sourced energy, mine water sourced energy and so on. We waste a lot of heat energy at the moment through our industrial processes and through thermal generation of electricity. We have not historically gone for combined heat and power systems on any significant scale.

One simple way of thinking about smart local energy systems is that we need to think much more in the future about making demand responsive to the available supply, as opposed to ramping up supply to meet demand, and building in much more flexibility in supply and use, which is often seen as a problem because we are used to centralised energy systems in Britain. But it is also a huge opportunity there for the taking. For example, the recent “Smart Systems and Flexibility Plan”, published by BEIS and Ofgem jointly just this year—a few weeks ago in fact—estimated savings of up to £10 billion a year by 2050 from reducing the scale of power generation and network reinforcement needed by turning those local balancing services to face local users of energy right across heat, power, transport and storage.

That requires, of course, a local government role to effect that change in energy planning and development. For example, there will be different opportunities in different places in areas where there is investment in the development of hydrogen for industrial use, for example. There may well be opportunities for hydrogen for heating buildings and obviously as a storage medium. In other areas there might be underground mine water sources or industrial heat available for district heating developments. In other areas there may be a plentiful supply of wind power connected to distribution networks that can be used to produce more electric-based local systems. In urban centres, fleets of electric vehicles could supply power to the grid during periods when there is little renewable energy, perhaps too little to meet demand, and so on.



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I also emphasise that the benefits to localities are more than technical and economic and to our whole system. They are also about local economic regeneration. They have social value in conferring the potential for better job skills, retraining and a socially just transition to clean energy. They can of course also open up opportunities for wider participation in decision-making about energy systems, local shares in ownership of energy and a better understanding—as we have seen from the citizens’ climate assemblies—of where energy comes from, how it is used and the costs and benefits of clean energy.

It is fair to say that we have not done this historically in Britain. It is much more established in other European countries. It does mean that local and regional governments typically have a greater enabling role to play and in generating revenues for local economies. I am not sure if I have now answered all of the bits or not.

Q128 Rachel Hopkins: That was thorough. Thank you. Richard, do you have anything you want to particularly add to some of this?

Richard Blyth: To build on that local point, again, I am pointing to Cornwall. In Cornwall, the fact that a windfarm, solar energy or other renewable energy source is community owned and led is a material consideration in deciding whether to grant planning permission through the local plan, which is interesting. Imposing a wind turbine on a community is, understandably, difficult for local people to swallow, particularly if they think, “The power is just leaking away to the national grid. What is in it for us to have this great white windmill on the horizon?” A much closer link, as we have been hearing, between the infrastructure and the people makes it a bit easier, “They are telling us we will get £100 off a year because we are hosting this thing. Let us vote in favour of it”.

Q129 Rachel Hopkins: Building on that, you just said about how people can be much closer to it themselves. Do you see that as a role for local government? What could central government do to make it easier for local authorities to be those conduits and to deliver more local energy networks?

Richard Blyth: From the point of view of planning permissions, firmly uphold that kind of policy that might be seen by some people as discriminatory. It is helpful if we can go on having community ownership as a material consideration in renewable energy planning applications.

Q130 Rachel Hopkins: For both of you again, I am conscious that in my town, Luton, 70% of homes have a D or below energy efficiency rating, so a lot of work will have to be done there, yet we are fifty-second out of local authorities on indices of deprivation. Where should the money come from for these things?

Professor Webb: There is an important and critical role here for public funding, on a consistent basis, as a contributor to planning and to getting that kind of action moving.



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I mentioned earlier the ELENA programme, for example, which allowed local authorities to develop local energy teams, including planning for retrofit of buildings on an area basis, which can bring the costs down and bring people together more effectively to think, “Yes, this is improving our area. We might find it troublesome to begin with, but it improves our quality of life. The whole neighbourhood looks a lot better. It looks like a good place to live. Therefore, we will put more effort into maintaining our buildings as well”. That needs to be combined with private sector investment but there are ways of incentivising that, including through affordable long-term loans for private property owners.

There is a greater pressure on all of us—and I am a property owner myself with my house—if that is planned at a local scale. We can see the opportunities coming along. There could be an area-based programme in my area and I could get my house done at the same time. I could get my property upgraded. I can see the value of that, I can discuss it with others, we can share knowledge and we can, I hope, get some guarantees about the performance of the improvements afterwards.

I emphasise that we have seen local energy investments and investments in building the capacity of local energy teams in local government, we have also seen the scaling up of that investment subsequently with private funding coming in to more than match the public funds that have been invested. For instance, I mentioned how that €23 million from ELENA funding led to €859 million in investments in local energy initiatives. When these are led locally, they typically include that integration with upgrading buildings.

It is not easy. I would not want to argue that any of this is easy. But it is important and it can create effective local employment and reskilling opportunities.

Richard Blyth: Something that has not been referred to is the unwelcome use of permitted development to create new dwelling units. This is not just me, but the Zurich Insurance Company published a report with extreme concern about the fact that when flats are made out of commercial accommodation—and there are some pretty ropey 1960s office blocks around the place—there is no requirement to deal with any climate issues at all, particularly overheating. The Government have conceded with a minimum space standard, but if any of you imagine living in an office block where you cannot open the windows sometimes and there are large areas of glass, there is a big danger. One in five UK homes already overheats, according to the Climate Change Committee, and we are creating tens of thousands of flats in office blocks that do not seem to, as far as I can see, have any ability to cope with either the overheating problem or issues around the transition to sustainable heating for the cold periods. That one small thing could be reversed.

Chair: Thank you for that. To wind up the questioning, Ben Everitt.

Q131 **Ben Everitt:** Thank you very much, Clive. We will start in Edinburgh with



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you, Professor. We will have to be quick because we are already into injury time on this, so we will do a rapid-fire round.

Thinking about the whole session, is there anything in particular that you feel we have not covered that you would like to tease out? Just by way of a rapid-fire answer, what would be your one ask of local government and your one ask of central government to get us to net zero?

Professor Webb: We have covered an awful lot of ground. There is always more to do, but I will focus on two central things to do.

For the UK Government, I would say we need a policy mandate—a framework, if you like—for net zero carbon localities that comes with the powers and resources to secure the long-term benefits from that and to invest in local authority or regional—it does not have to be every local authority—net zero teams. For example, use those National Infrastructure Bank funds to provide the kind of technical assistance and development capital that we have already seen is effective in making progress at local and regional scale towards clean energy, certainly.

Then, for local government, I would like to see all local governments evaluate their local and regional public expenditure against net zero principles rather than predominantly still at present least short-term price. We cannot afford, literally, to carry on prioritising least short-term price at the cost of the long term and at the cost of what we might call intergenerational justice.

Q132 **Ben Everitt:** Thank you very much. Richard, that first point there sounded very much like one of the asks that your organisation had submitted to the Government. Is there anything that you feel that we have not covered today that needs highlighting? What are your big asks of central government and local government?

Richard Blyth: I will cut straight to the one big asks. For the government, the National Planning Policy Framework should give smart energy and climate change equal status with the provision of housing and economic growth and enable local authorities to take appropriate action including setting targets that go beyond national standards. We should be having as much focus on how we are meeting carbon objectives as we do on the number of houses built.

Locally, work together across your departments in local authorities and work together across your boundaries, especially if your authority is a relatively small land area.

Q133 **Ben Everitt:** Thank you very much. Xavier, the same questions to you, please.

Xavier Brice: One thing to highlight that has been touched on is on the levelling up side of this agenda and what we are talking about. Policy and investment in walking, cycling and public transport does prioritise those who are disadvantaged and marginalised a lot of the time. It can do and



should do. It takes effort to ensure it does as well. Although only 20% of households in the UK do not have access to a car, that increases significantly in more deprived areas. That is about ensuring access to education, skills, employment and local services. It is worth highlighting that, especially given how often cycling is perceived as a middle-class activity. It is about walking and public transport as well.

Of the two asks, the one for local government would be on that point and having the courage to deliver walking and cycling schemes that are community-led and meet public demand for this. There is public demand to decarbonise transport and to make it easier for walking and cycling. It can be daunting in the face of opposition, but schemes that work with local people that identify and address their needs will overcome what is often a minority opposition to said schemes.

Then, for central Government, it is about ending stop-start funding and outlining a long-term financial settlement for walking and cycling so that local authorities can develop and deliver ambitious strategies with confidence that the funding will not dry up in nine months' time.

Chair: Thank you to our three witnesses for comprehensive answers to a whole range of important issues that we will certainly be reflecting on carefully when we come to write our report. You gave us useful, practical and well-evidenced information. Thank you, all, very much indeed.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Councillor Peter Schwier , Nick Hibberd and Councillor Sarah Rouse.

Q134 **Chair:** We will move on to our second panel of witnesses, who are all coming to us virtually today. Thank you for joining us today. I hope you can all hear the committee loud and clear. I will begin, therefore, by asking each of you in turn—I will say who I want to answer first and so on—to say who you are and who you are representing today.

Councillor Rouse: I am the leader at Malvern Hills District Council. I am representing the District Council Network from its Enhancing Quality of Life Panel.

Councillor Schwier: I am the climate czar in Essex County Council.

Nick Hibberd: Good afternoon. I am executive director for economy, environments and culture at Brighton and Hove City Council.

Q135 **Chair:** Thank you all for coming today to tell us about the experiences of your own particular local authorities and what is happening. That is the first question I will be asking. What actions are your councils taking? Briefly summarise what is going on. Most importantly, not merely what policies do you have but what progress are you making in achieving them?



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Councillor Rouse: In the District Council Network, 80% of our district councils have already declared a climate emergency and 50% of those have ambitious targets greater than 2050, so we have that drive there to do this. Half of them have a climate plan as a core theme within their councils and have integrated it in with everything else, so it is communities, economy and climate as well.

I have some examples of a few that are, I suppose, exemplars of what they have done. Stroud became carbon neutral in its own estate in 2015, one of the first in this area to do that. North Kesteven has reduced emissions by 65% already and has only just declared a climate emergency. Lewis Council is an exemplar. It has built into its corporate plan the green recovery. It has become integral to what we do.

How well we are doing is harder to put anything on because it is funding. Everything we are trying to do requires money. It will cost a lot of money to do this. We are struggling across the districts to demonstrate where we are on that scale. In my own district, we have set our current plan and we have ambitious targets, but most of what we are doing is within limited budgets. We have £500,000 to spend, which will not even buy two bin lorries.

That is where we are. We have started the process. We need the funding.

Q136 **Chair:** Okay. Councillor Schwier, do you echo those comments?

Councillor Schwier: Yes, I do, but here in Essex we have set out a clear vision for renewal, equality and ambition across Essex, and action on the climate emergency is at the heart of everything we do.

We established an independent climate commission last year and this was chaired by Lord Randall and brought together a huge range of expertise and experience, renowned academics, business and community leaders and stakeholders' groups. In July this year, we launched "Net zero: Making Essex carbon neutral". This plan set out a pathway to net zero, equality and, importantly, climate resilience. The county can then deal with the more extreme weather that we are seeing year on year. This has called for concentrated action from everyone, the public sector, local and national businesses, at community and individual level. We know that we need to act urgently.

We have recently published our new organisational strategy, but we are of course already doing much in the space with our ambition to ensure our own estate to be net zero by 2030. Two of our most consuming sites in Essex County Council's core estate have both begun a refit programme to help reduce their carbon emissions. The Essex Records Office and Goodman House will benefit from LED lighting and control upgrades, decarbonising of the gas heating, installation of two air-source heat pumps and over 100kW of roof-mounted solar PV with combined battery storage. The school extension projects for three schools have been carried out using innovative modular forms of construction to reduce



waste and carbon emissions. These new net zero buildings are achieving higher efficiency standards, EPC A+, and are fitted with low-carbon heat and renewables. We have more planned.

Our Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy, published in 2020, was awarded a Building with Nature accreditation of excellence. We were one of only eight local authorities to gain this. We are upgrading our famous Essex Design Planning Guide to reflect best practice in net zero and resilient construction. We are planting trees—38,000 last year—and are delivering ongoing investment in flood prevention, increasingly using nature-based solutions to better protect residents and our landscapes from more extreme weather while storing carbon. We are looking to unlock grant funding opportunities for residents, supporting the role of Government grant programmes such as the Green Homes Grant, focused on fuel-poor homes. We are working with other authorities to co-ordinate funding bids enabling marketing grants to residents to ensure maximum uptake. We are also leading an innovative cross-border project with local authority partners in England and France, working to transition to a circular economy. This project aims to increase recycling rates, reduce waste and encouraging lasting behaviour change. We are working with our residents and communities to support them to do the right thing.

We are part of the waste partnership in Essex, Love Essex, which works with Freegle. This is an online platform that allows you to give and receive items for free in your local area. There are now 20 Freegle groups across Essex with over 70,000—

Q137 Chair: Councillor, it is obviously a very comprehensive list of things that you are doing in the authority and it is good that we are hearing about it but we have a limit on time to try to get through all the issues. If there is more information you want to give us we are happy to receive it but we need to go on to the next witness now to try to concentrate on all the issues we need to get through. Thank you for that.

Nick Hibberd, what is happening in Brighton?

Nick Hibberd: In Brighton and Hove we declared a climate and biodiversity emergency in December 2018 and we are committed to becoming a carbon neutral city by 2030. We specifically seized the urgency and ambition of this target for the whole city, rather than just for the city council. We have published a carbon neutral programme that outlines not just the actions but the projects and investments that we feel we need to take to transition the city to carbon neutral by 2030.

Our total carbon emissions have fallen by just over a third since 2005 but that largest cut in admissions has come from electricity, so renewal electricity from windfarms, solar power, from the national grid. Going forward our science-based target shows that we are required to reduce greenhouse emissions by about 12.7% annually from last year onwards. There remains that massive challenge.



We are taking steps to do that in a variety of ways. I will not list them all due to time but it is things like ensuring our new council housing buildings are designed to be low carbon, through retrofitting our existing council housing stock, investing a significant amount of our own funding in that, minimising the need for transport and ensuring low carbon methods of transport are encouraged and enabled. It is using our role as place shapers and our powers in relation to buildings, transport systems, waste services and the natural environment to help deliver on decarbonisation of ambitions and exerting influence on the wider supply chain so requiring our suppliers and contractors to work towards net zero.

Our carbon neutral programme covers five priority areas: travel and transport, energy and water, waste, the built environment and the natural environment. Running through that there are a number of cross-cutting things that we think are important to any net zero strategy. Communication, engagement, behaviour change, jobs, education, skills, transition to a circular economy, climate adaptation, carbon offsetting and procurement.

Lastly, one of the things that is important to us locally is that we work at a regional level and we are trying to work through the Greater Brighton city region and the Greater Brighton Economic Board to work out to transition the region at scale and what we need to do with our partners to be able to ensure that the key utilities—energy infrastructure, transport infrastructure—are transitioned at pace and at scale. That is including doing things like initiating Hydrogen Sussex, which is a group that is looking at the development of the hydrogen economy across the city region, consulting and looking at the future of our endowment estate in partnership with the National Parks, looking at nature-based solutions both in relation to blue carbon in the marine environment but also green carbon in terms of the endowment estates.

We are working with our partners like the water companies on the aquifer partnership, looking at reducing pollutants going into ground water.

We firmly believe that the key to this is working both locally as a city but also regionally at scale.

Q138 Chair: I will follow up on that. That is working with partners locally and regionally, what about nationally with Government Departments? How engaged are they? Is there a framework there that has been developed that you can follow, not just with the Ministry most closely related, MHCLG, but also other Government Departments as well?

Nick Hibberd: The challenge for local authorities is to twofold. We recognise that naturally all the Government Departments have a role to play in the transition to net zero but there is a need for co-ordination to take place and there needs to be a coherent framework, not just on how those Government Departments work together but how they will work with local authorities to support places with that transition.



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You have BEIS with some overall responsibility, MHCLG looking at local government finance, planning and housing, DEFRA for looking at responsibility for waste, DfT for transport and so on. There are other Departments looking at those cross-cutting issues such as procurement and skills and the economy. There is a need to try to address that fragmentation, to support us with a more coherent framework around policy development and funding to support places to be able to make the most of what is happening in those Government Departments.

Q139 Chair: Councillor Rouse, you must come across many authorities, perhaps getting a little frustrated occasionally about interrelationships with Departments and not always necessarily getting the same message from the different Departments?

Councillor Rouse: Absolutely, yes. That is what we need, that clear framework. We need everyone to come together because the thing about the climate emergency is that it does cut across everything. It is agriculture, it is waste, it is all of those things. We need that clear framework so that we can deliver what we want to deliver and we need the stability of the longer-term funding. We are not doing this next year, we need to know how many years we can have this funding.

The critical key from a district level is give us that framework. Tell us what you want us to do and under what banner and we will develop the policies and deliver it. That is very much the frustration, I think, of the districts, just give us the framework.

Q140 Chair: Councillor Schwier, you are doing a lot of things but do you have the frustrations as well about lack of clear direction from Government Departments or lack of clear same direction from different Departments?

Councillor Schwier: I would like to echo the sentiments of the two previous witnesses. I agree with that. I think we do need long-term, clear direction from central government. That would have huge benefits in tackling climate change, which we all need to grasp very quickly.

As has been previously stated, with longer-term funding we will get clear directions and locally have the ability to carry out that funding to get results.

Chair: That is helpful. Moving on now to look at transport. Brendan Clarke-Smith.

Q141 Brendan Clarke-Smith: Hello, everybody. In terms of reducing transport emissions, how important is public transport? I am thinking particularly bus services here. What, if anything, have you or your members done to improve these services? Councillor Rouse.

Councillor Rouse: In my own district, we are a very small rural district, we do not really have buses so with the best will in the world we would love to get the buses going again but that is not going to happen. What we focus very much on is the other options, the active travel, the car



shares, the e-bikes, all of that, because that is what we are trying to do. I suspect a lot of rural districts will be doing that.

We do not have direct control over the buses. That is at county level but working together with all the partners and trying to bring that together is key for us. What I think we need to see is a proper sustainable travel system where you can get on a bus somewhere and then get on a train and get somewhere else, like they have in Germany, so you do not have the fractures we have with our bus service. That would be my big ask, to bring it all together, bring the public transport system together.

Q142 Brendan Clarke-Smith: Thank you, I was going to ask on that. Do you think it is possible to deliver cheap and reliable bus services in rural areas? Do you feel this is a big problem?

Councillor Rouse: It is about innovating. We do not have the population to run a rural bus service so what we are doing in Malvern that is quite key is the crowdfunding. What we are keen on is the asset-based community development. Getting the community to do it for themselves because once we have their buy in then they will support it. We are looking at car shares, we are looking at community bus services, we are looking at all the other options, even if it is e-bikes to get you to the train station. We cannot bring rural bus services back—it is not practical, it is not viable—but there are a great number of other options that we could do. If we are given the funding we can deliver it and that will bring about the climate change because that is what we can do in our rural areas.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: Councillor Schwier, what would you say?

Councillor Schwier: In Essex we are not only urban but we have also got a very large part of a rural population and some market towns. What would be good is the continuation of the digital demand response to transport. This is going to be essential going forward for rural areas in order—that stage 4 can go to the urban areas and connect up and make those journeys onwards. We have to look at bus services in a holistic way. Too often we divide between urban and rural and we have to look at this long term. Although they are different problems we need to look at this holistically so we can link up.

Buses must not be seen in isolation. We also have to think of the walking, cycling and e-scooters as well and connect all of this up.

Q143 Brendan Clarke-Smith: Following on from that, do you feel councils have the right powers in this area? The Government has been saying if local transport authorities want franchising powers they would get them. Do you think this would help?

Councillor Schwier: Yes, I think it would help. Enhanced bus partnerships are beginning to emerge now and that is an important thing going forward as well. As a previous witness said, we also need to innovate too. We have to look at new things. What is going to help people perhaps transition to a change of using public transport more is if they



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are going to be carbon-free. If we were able to get hydrogen and electric buses into action, I think this would help that transition and make them more accessible and people would want to use them as well, which would be a gamechanger.

Q144 Brendan Clarke-Smith: Mr Hibberd, I was noticing that outside of London, Brighton and Hove have the highest bus usage per head in England. How did you do that?

Nick Hibberd: Bus travel is very important in a city like Brighton and Hove. We are a constrained city, by the South Downs National Park and the sea. We have limited east-west, north-south routes. We have had to focus on investing and supporting the bus network. The success of that has been caused by having a strong bus partnership with our commercial bus operators.

We have a quality bus partnership; it has been recognised by DfT as an example of good practice and is very similar to the enhanced bus partnerships DfT are now asking localities to set up. It is through investment in interventions that support that strong bus network that we have been able to build patronage over successive years. That is investing in priority bus lanes, multi-operator ticketing, things like tap on and tap off ticketing to make it easier for users and quicker for getting on and off buses, real-time information at train stations as well as bus stops, wi-fi, phone charging on the buses so that passenger experience is better, and investment in new and low emission buses, which is important in terms of the transition to net zero.

Working in partnership with bus users and bus operators is absolutely key.

Q145 Ian Byrne: A quick supplementary to Sarah. Can you outline what the bus services were like before deregulation, if you are old enough to remember that?

Councillor Rouse: I think I am. All I can say is we used to be able to get a bus to Malvern on a Friday from where I lived and now we can't. We have not had great bus services for as long as I can remember. Sorry, I cannot really help. I can google it and find out for you.

Ian Byrne: If you could write into the Committee about what it was like before deregulation to give us a picture of what it was, that would be very helpful, thank you.

Councillor Rouse: I will find out.

Chair: Certainly one thing Councillor Rouse did mention was walking and active travel, Mary Robinson wants to explore that further.

Q146 Mary Robinson: I will stay with Councillor Rouse to begin. You did mention the issue around funding, cost and so on. The Government say a modal shift towards active travel is one of the most cost-effective ways of



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reducing emissions, do you agree with that? Is that part of your motivation? What are your council members doing to promote active travel?

Councillor Rouse: I do think it is one of the most cost-effective ones. I am hugely supportive of it and I feel that the residents and people in my area and across the district council network are supportive of it. It is something that has come out of Covid. We all know that people do want that, they want that shift from cars.

In my local area, I will be honest with you, we have struggled. The districts were incredibly keen to focus on active travel and on walking. The county council, I am afraid, were not supportive of following the active travel route. I am hopeful they are going to come back on that. We have a local transport plan that sets out the active travel routes but we have not funded them because we cannot. We are trying to build that into our local plan so that all links together. Locally we have the plan, we have the push, we are lobbying hard for the active travel, we know it has support but the county level is pushing back on it. My ask would be that the Government stops that. The Government say if you are in local government you need to be fully supportive of it going forward.

Q147 **Mary Robinson:** Can you explain why they are pushing back? Is it about funding or are there other issues that we need to explore?

Councillor Rouse: It is partly funding but also a lack of real buy in from those councillors—that they believe in it. The response we had when we pushed for the active travel fund during Covid, where we were trying to give people and bikes space, was that we are a rural area so the car must come first. Those were the responses we got back.

That is not what we want. The district councils do not want that. We are hugely supportive of pushing for this change so we need the support all across the network. We are working with all the local cycle groups and all the residents to create that space where people want to support this. We have a bridge—they have put in an active travel bridge—but it doesn't go anywhere.

Q148 **Mary Robinson:** It will join two things together, I am hoping. You answered there around the active travel fund, to what extent has it been helpful?

Councillor Rouse: We were not allowed to use it. We wanted to do it in our towns and centres. We wanted to create these spaces for people and people were keen on it. What we got was a few traffic cones and the pushback that we do not want to lose car parking spaces. In Worcestershire, not great.

Q149 **Mary Robinson:** Thank you. I will get another councillor's opinion next, if I may. Councillor Schwier, regarding pushback or embracing with open arms, how successful has this been for you?



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Councillor Schwier: Embracing with open arms. If I give you an example, we have five experiments ongoing at the moment on active travel. We have one in one of our local towns, Braintree, where we are linking up our train station to the town centre. They are not particularly close but that is receiving overwhelming support going forward.

Another example is in Chelmsford where we have a big town centre but the walking and cycling strategy is now pushing out into the more residential and linking those up. Holistically that is good. We have received some funding on that but this is making a great difference. From the result of the data that we received from residents on our research, this is also well supported, it is to be encouraged and we would like to see more funding and some maintenance on this as well going forward.

Q150 **Mary Robinson:** Nick Hibberd, how is it going down in Brighton and Hove?

Nick Hibberd: In Brighton and Hove we have been successful in getting funding from DfT in both tranches of the emergency active travel fund. That is very important to us because it fits with all of the work we are doing around cycling and walking. Brighton has one of the lowest rates of car ownership in the country and nearly twice as many people walk to work in Brighton and Hove compared to the rest of the UK. Promoting cycling and walking has always been part of our strategy.

We also have one of the most successful bike share schemes in the country in terms of a scheme that is viable and very well used. The active travel funding schemes were not without their challenges. Particularly in the first tranche we were required to deliver those schemes within a very short time frame and that was understandable in the context of recovery and coming out of lockdown restrictions, but it did mean that our ability to be able to engage with communities and to make the case for the benefits for those communities of active travel was challenged. That meant that in some areas we have had more difficulty with the implementation of those in the longer term. Overall we have found the gear change strategy to be helpful and certainly the funding is welcome as part of an integrated approach of walking and cycling alongside the investment we give to public transport as well.

Q151 **Mary Robinson:** There was little or no pushback against things like cycle lanes and so on, which in some areas do have a lot of hostile reaction from local residents when they are first put forward and do not get off the ground?

Nick Hibberd: We did have pushback and it is important to understand the implementation of any changes like this, particularly when you are looking at how to use a constrained resource such as the highway. How do you prioritise what you should use? What should be for buses and cars and what should be for cycling and walking? In certain parts of the city we have had pushback and we have been asked to remove some of the temporary cycle lanes that we had installed.



Overall, however, we do think it is important that we get that balance as part of the comprehensive strategy. Therefore, the funding that has been used, we have been able to spend, and we are continuing to deliver tranche 2 of the emergency active travel funding, which we feel will have significant benefit in terms of the comprehensive transport strategy for the city.

Q152 Mary Robinson: I will just stay with you a moment longer. Obviously you have been encouraging active travel and been positive about this, what about disincentives for car usage? Have you introduced a clean air zone or congestion charging? Is there a balance that has to be struck between penalising car usage and incentivising the active travel schemes?

Nick Hibberd: Absolutely there is a balance to be struck. We have an ultra-low emission zone in the city centre, which at the moment just applies to buses. We are currently doing some work on bringing that more widely across the city as part of a liveable city initiative, which may look at some sort of pricing for certain types of vehicles coming into the city, as you would see with other ultra-low emission zones or clean air zones around the country.

We also use our parking policies quite carefully as a city council, particularly as a visitor economy, to ensure that we get the right balance between using pricing for parking to manage congestion and to manage areas where clean air is of concern to us, while also incentivising people to use low emission vehicles where the prices are cheaper to do that. There is an absolute balance that needs to be struck between all of the modes of transport and how you use pricing to incentivise changes in behaviour.

Lastly on that, the other important thing is about behaviour change strategies and therefore we do a lot of work and put a lot of emphasis on working with schools and businesses on their transport policies and supporting cycling to work schemes and supporting people to think about travelling through the city in different modes of transports. That is an important aspect as well.

Q153 Mary Robinson: I recognise that in rural areas clean-air zones may not quite have the same impact and take up. Councillor Rouse, how has the district council network received them and what is the role of policies like these?

Councillor Rouse: It is incredibly supportive. Everything that is going on in Brighton and Hove is what we want to do. We want to deliver these things. Good collaboration is needed across the counties. One of the key links is what you said there about Brighton and Hove working with the communities—the districts are at that local level working with the communities. If you cannot persuade people to get out of their car and cycle, get that support and get that local ownership. That is what the



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district level can do. We can work with all our partners to deliver that and bring it about.

Q154 **Mary Robinson:** Councillor Schwier, do you have anything to add?

Councillor Schwier: I agree about collaboration. Not only from our point of view at county but through to district and town planners as well. Collaboration is important for active travel.

Chair: On to matters to do with planning. We may be having a vote shortly as well so we will interrupt proceedings. Bob Blackman.

Q155 **Bob Blackman:** We will make a start. Obviously a lot of the discussion earlier has been what we can do immediately but the planning system has a means by which we can decide what to do in the future. What have the different local authorities that we have here managed to put into the planning system to encourage the position of getting to net zero? I will start with you, Councillor Rouse, as that might be something the districts are looking at very closely.

Councillor Rouse: We all are as districts. I can give a couple of good examples. I have Cambridge City Council's local plan where they have mandatory energy use requirements that are higher than existing building regulations. People are trying to build them in there. They are trying very hard here in central Lincolnshire to again deliver things that are higher than our building regulations. The issue we have is that this may be found unsound because what we are trying to deliver is not within the planning system—it is not within the assessment of local plans. What districts want to put into our local plans and what we all want to build is sustainable homes with good active travel corridors, with open space, with biodiversity, with the highest possible standards that we can achieve, but the NPPF where we are does not back that up at the moment. What we want to put in our local plans we are hampered—

Q156 **Bob Blackman:** What about changing the local plan, for example, to have retail units within new housing estates, having employment within very easy reach, walking distance of where people are living rather than forcing people to commute long distances, which frankly means they will travel by car because that is the easiest way to get around?

Councillor Rouse: In the urban design factor, you have your higher level where you have your plan policies that say you will build this many homes and you will take account of climate change, right down to how to build an estate, how you build that community, putting in that local shop. In the rural area what we need is good broadband. You cannot work from home because we do not have any broadband. In my house you cannot get a mobile phone signal either.

It is about providing that real infrastructure. We are building it into our plans that we want linked communities with all these great infrastructures.



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Q157 Bob Blackman: One of the areas discussed in earlier evidence, I do not know if you observed this, was the suggestion that we have to reduce car usage by 60% as well as getting everyone to use electric cars. One way of doing that is stopping people commuting and enabling them to work from home rather than having to commute. What is being put into the planning system to enable people to work from home rather than having to work off their dining room table or sharing facilities that are not acceptable? Is that going into your planning systems?

Councillor Rouse: Yes, we are trying to build it in but obviously we need simple things such as broadband. We need the people delivering it to get on and deliver it—Western Power in Worcestershire. We cannot put electricity charging points into any of our car parks because we have no power. We have a wonderful company called INDRA in Malvern who deliver battery units. You can charge them up in your house and then charge your car with them. Amazing company. We cannot use their technology in our street lamps because Western Power are not delivering it.

As much as we build into our local plan, we need Western Power, we need BT and we need all of those companies to step up. That is where the government comes in. We need the investment in the infrastructure.

I can design beautiful rural villages that have all the infrastructure they need, but if they don't connect the high-speed broadband to the telephone system I can't do anything. What I also do not have are the powers of enforcement. I can ask the developers to build all of this but I have no enforcement powers when they do not do it. Coming from a local planning authority, if they are going to build two-bedroom flats instead of one then all I can do is fine them £1,000. When it comes to climate change and the expensive stuff, I don't have the powers to make them do.

Q158 Bob Blackman: Let me move to Councillor Schwier. How are Essex using the planning system to enable people to both work from home and, indeed, making sure we reduce commuting requirements?

Councillor Schwier: We have a very strong digital policy in Essex called Superfast Essex where we are rolling the infrastructure out as quickly as we can. This is very important in rural areas. It is as vital in rural areas as it is in urban areas.

We are doing quite well in some of our rural areas where we now have not only Essex Superfast broadband being rolled out in a village but on a pilot basis we also have other fibre broadband being delivered.

The planning situation is quite frustrating with regards to net zero, because as a previous speaker said, a lot of time you get planning applications and they tend to bolt on to our communities. They are bolted on to our communities without much thought to net zero but also the effect it will have on that community. In Essex we have just got a One



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Garden community where I think this gives opportunity to build from the ground up and design in all those factors, not only net zero and the community but also the walking strategy, the bicycle strategy and the working environment. This will help people stay in a rural, close-knit community, with the appropriate green space being designed from the ground up. That is a terrific opportunity for Essex going forward. We would like to see that replicated because the frustration with the NPPF is that at the moment we do not have the powers to move quickly enough towards net zero.

Q159 **Bob Blackman:** Nick Hibberd, you talked earlier about the constraints that Brighton and Hove has because it is surrounded by greenfield sites. Does that mean in your housing policy and your local plans that you have to densify the town centres?

Nick Hibberd: It does and we do that through quite an extensive house building and housing development programme and through our planning policies. Our planning policies include the best low carbon building standards that were permitted at the time the plan was published. We have a number of different supplementary planning documents, planning advice notes on a wide range of sustainability topics, including the urban sign frameworks, single drainage, food growing, external wall insulation and we also follow the REBA climate change design principles for our own developments to make sure that we are embedding those sustainable development goals within our own design.

The challenge for us is that the July revisions for the National Planning Policy Framework does strengthen and reference the role of planning delivery and sustainable development but it is not clear yet whether those design guides and codes will enable us to still adopt local standards and drive locally the ambition to achieve net zero carbon developments. It is not clear to what extent local planning policies can adopt local standards and go further than the future home standards and building regs that are currently in place.

Q160 **Bob Blackman:** Obviously, Mr Hibberd, you are the only council we are talking to at moment that is next to the sea. Are you using the sea in a positive aspect to try and reduce the impact of carbon in the local community? I do not know if, for example, you are able to do any planting under the sea, which would absorb carbon dioxide in a positive way?

Nick Hibberd: In terms of nature-based marine solutions—habitat restoration—this is an area that we are looking at quite strongly. You may be aware that we recently, with partners across the coastal region of Greater Brighton, agreed a bylaw that bans trawling in the near shore area of the coastal strip across that part of Sussex. What this has meant is that we are now able to embark upon a kelp restoration project and that project is looking at restoring the kelp habitat and whether there are ways that we can support the capturing of carbon through kelp restoration. We are working with the University of Sussex on whether



there are other marine habitat restoration projects that we can deliver through a Sussex Bay approach with the ultimate aim of, “Can you develop a marine park for that part of the region?” We are also in discussions with partners across the border at Adur and Worthing councils about whether it is possible to lease parts of the seabed from the Crown to the local authority so we are able to take nature-based solutions in exactly the same way as we do because we own significant parts of the Downland Estate. Having that ownership allows us to take stronger action to support climate adaptation and habitat restoration.

Bob Blackman: Thank you.

Chair: Moving now to Florence Eshalomi to look at energy issues.

Q161 **Florence Eshalomi:** Looking now at energy and heat, one of the things you have touched on before is looking at smart energy and heat network systems. Do you have any additional experience and could you highlight how that has worked within your own councils in the schemes implemented?

Councillor Rouse: We don’t have any in Malvern but I have some examples of other districts that are working on this. Colchester Borough Council are looking to assess the feasibility of a microgrid. I am not quite sure what this is technically. They are delivering low carbon sources of energy for the local people. South Somerset is another one. They are looking at creating sustainable local energy solutions. They have worked with Somerset based Opium Power Limited to create a new 30-megawatt energy storage facility near Taunton. This might be something that we need to be looking at for rural areas. The problem is, as I said earlier, we do not have the power in the area at the time we need it so we cannot deliver it. They plan to build another as well. It is going to be the largest council-owned battery storage system in the UK. The problem we have is the funding of them. I keep coming back to that. It is a huge expenditure.

Those are the two examples I have of district councils that are driving the change. In Malvern we are small, we are rural, we desperately want to engage in this and something that I think we should be looking at and we are keen to look at here is links with the collection of food waste—the biomethane and the anaerobic digestors—and how we build that into what we are doing. If we are collecting food waste we need to bring all those systems together.

Q162 **Florence Eshalomi:** If you were to then receive the funding, do you think this is something that would work within your area?

Councillor Rouse: Absolutely. The local energy idea—that you are doing it with the community, in your area of the world—has to be a way forward because it seems the logical, sensible step to take it forward. Looking at things like the South Somerset District Council, if we could



afford to do that—if we could generate that energy locally and store it—we could solve a lot of our own problems without Western Power. Yes.

Q163 **Florence Eshalomi:** Are there any examples in Brighton, Nick?

Nick Hibberd: Sure. With large scale heat networks, the main example would be on the University of Sussex campus at Falmer. We tend to find that we are able to do communal heat networks more easily or more commonly when they are serving a single block. There are examples such as the new student accommodation that is being developed with the University of Brighton which has a low carbon heat network. We have done studies that will look at whether we can use some of our housing stock and our municipal buildings as an anchor load, to be able to ensure the viability of larger heat networks.

We are currently developing 42 homes in two blocks of flats that will use a decentralised ground source heat pump system and a shared ambient temperate heat. Individual heat pumps are supplied in each home that are linked together.

Interestingly, one of the challenges we have had with communal heating systems is that more recently we are finding that they are contributing to some overheating and maybe that is because we are getting more extreme hot weather during the summers. It is becoming important that the improvements to fabric efficiency consider the risk of distributing that heat efficiently through buildings as part of the design.

When we are looking at things like the heat networks and energy networks, I think it is also important to remember that for a significant proportion of the housing stock in Brighton and Hove the solution will be around mass retrofitting. It is important that we think about the need for investment and consistent programmes to get confidence for landlords, homeowners and for the whole supply chain to be able to invest in retrofitting the housing stock as well as thinking about the design and development of new buildings through the introduction of new heat networks or through the planning system.

Q164 **Florence Eshalomi:** Is there any funding identified for the retrofitting? For example, I think back to the estate that I grew up in in Brixton, a big estate, communal heating, there were parts of the flat that were much hotter than other parts. When that boiler system went down, everyone on the estate suffered. Again, is there funding for that been identified to not just look at improving that for residents but equally how you reduce the emissions?

Nick Hibberd: In Brighton and Hove the city council has allocated significant funding through our warmer homes programme to both support retrofitting of our own stock—our own housing revenue account stock—and to support a programme of retrofitting across our very large private rented sector.



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I suppose the challenge is that we have needed to allocate that funding ourselves and the sudden termination of the green home grants programme has meant that we have not been able to supplement that. However, we do think that through investing in warmer homes ourselves, we are able to stimulate the market, and we are hopeful that will then lever in some private investment. It helps us to help the local supply chain to be skilled up and trained. At the end of the day the gasfitters of today need to become the heat pump fitters of tomorrow.

By investing ourselves we are able to do that work, but we will need support from Government funding and the retrofitting schemes nationally so that local authorities are not doing this independently and in a piecemeal fashion.

Q165 Florence Eshalomi: Peter, any schemes that Essex County Council have in place?

Councillor Schwier: With regards to Essex, as a county council we do not deliver this as such. District heating networks have a real opportunity but obviously they have to be in densely populated environments as well to benefit from that. What is really important, if you are going to support the transition to low carbon heat outside of the plans for heat networks, and one of the things we would particularly welcome, is the 5% VAT rate on energy saving materials. That would have an enormous benefit on the costs and encouraging that uptake as well.

Q166 Florence Eshalomi: Do you think there is anything else that local government could do to help facilitate investment in those renewable energy schemes?

Councillor Schwier: With heat networks, communication with businesses because there are a lot of businesses in the industry that have a lot of energy that can be used potentially for heating. Again, collaboration with that in combination with where they are placed in the densely populated areas close by.

Florence Eshalomi: I am happy to leave it there, Chair, thank you.

Q167 Mohammad Yasin: First, if you could ask for one thing that central government could do to make it easier for councils to meet the net zero targets, what would it be? Secondly, is there anything we missed during our discussion today that could make a significant contribution to achieving net zero and make it easier for councils? To all three of you but Peter first.

Councillor Schwier: The one thing that would be essential to help the move forward towards net zero is a joined-up-policy approach with adequate funding in the long term. Also, not only the funding for capital projects but for maintenance as well. That is going to be very important.



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We need to embed that so that we, as a county council, know exactly what we can do, and potentially if that money was to be lodged with us, from a finance point of view, that would be good.

Councillor Rouse: I agree. It is that clear policy framework across all areas so we know where we are heading, what we are doing and how we can deliver it for you. That would make our lives easier because all we want to do is deliver. Obviously, it is the long-term funding because we need to know for five to 10 years. The climate emergency is rolling on but these things are big items; they are expensive. We want to make sure we are doing it right. We want to plan ahead and we need to plan five or 10 years ahead. We cannot do it year on year.

The one thing that we have missed is planning viability. If we demand greater sustainable homes, and more expensive use of resources, then we lose out in affordable homes or we lose out in community infrastructure money. What we can't do is ask for any more out of that pot unless the pot changes. My ask would be to change that so that we can get more out of the pot. Perhaps landowners and developers at the moment are still taking their cut, but we are losing out as a local government because we are not delivering for our residents sustainable homes that are well built and connected to the network with good infrastructure. That would be the bit I think I missed.

Mohammad Yasin: Thank you. Finally, Nick.

Nick Hibberd: I agree with both councillors: it is about needing consistency and clarity, both in terms of the regulatory framework, national policy and sufficient funding. It is only if we get that that we can see government, regional agencies and local authorities all working together. National policy is going to go a long way to delivering the transition to carbon neutral but we can achieve much greater impacts if it focuses on local knowledge and local partnership, which local authorities are able to convene and deliver. That consistency and clarity for the framework policy and backed up by funding will allow us to work together to deliver the change.

Chair: Thank you very much, Mohammad, and thank you to our three witnesses. You have given us a lot of information about what is happening on the ground, about the policies you have in place and how you are delivering on them but also quite a challenge, I think, to central government as well about how local government could be more involved with the appropriate framework, a clear sense of direction from the centre and more funding to enable you to do it. That is the message we take and I am sure it will be something we will think about reflecting in our report when we do it.

Thank you all very much indeed for your evidence this afternoon. Fortunately we have beaten the vote so we have not had an interruption. That brings us to the end of our public proceedings for today.



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