

## Written evidence from Policy Connect

### Introduction

Policy Connect is a membership-based, not-for-profit, cross-party think tank dedicated to improving people's lives by influencing UK public policy. We bring together parliamentarians and government in collaboration with academia, business and civil society to inform, influence and improve UK public policy through debate, research and innovative thinking. Our work focuses on key policy areas including: health, accessibility, education and skills, industry, technology and innovation, and sustainability. This submission has been compiled by the Sustainability Team.

### Evidence

Our [Climate Policy Dashboard](#) demonstrates that government is currently not on track to meet future carbon budgets or the UK's 2050 net zero target. The Dashboard indicates that the buildings and waste sectors are least supported by government policy in the low-carbon transition. These are sectors in which local government is heavily involved and can make significant impact.

This submission is based on research carried out during 2021 and discussions with the heat, power and transport sectors. Evidence provided in this submission draws upon our ongoing inquiry into a delivery architecture for net zero, co-chaired by Darren Jones MP, Wera Hobhouse MP and Alexander Stafford MP. It will provide recommendations on how net zero can be delivered to meet the UK's 2050 target across heating, power and transport. It explores net zero governance, skills and standards, public engagement and business models, and is expected to be published by Carbon Connect in October 2021. Evidence is also derived from roundtables with parliamentarians, industry, academia and the third sector which took place in the course of this inquiry. The inquiry will recommend that a delivery authority is required for net zero, to implement a co-ordinated delivery of government policy and promote a whole-systems approach to skills and standards, public engagement and business.

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### **What should local authorities' roles and responsibilities in reaching net zero by 2050 be?**

Local authorities are vital to the successful delivery of net zero. Future governance frameworks must recognise this and strike the right balance between bottom-up and top-down policymaking. Our current inquiry focusses on two key roles and responsibilities particularly vital for the next steps on the road to 2050: net-zero skills and building trust.

Local authorities should take a leading role in developing and deploying the net-zero skills that will be essential for the transition. Local authorities should be accorded the responsibility of defining local targets for upskilling and reskilling to create a low-carbon labour force, in collaboration with central government. Local authorities hold vital information about local needs and priorities, such as the quantity and nature of homes that are suitable for heat pumps, which defines the associated need for skilled installers. Through local area energy plans, local authorities can provide understanding of which technologies and solutions will work best in their area, optimise local

infrastructure and provide accountability to residents. This will help ensure the benefits of re- and upskilling are shared across the UK and that local needs are met effectively.

Local authorities should then also take a leading role in developing these net-zero skills on the ground, by encouraging interest in low-carbon careers in primary and secondary as well as further education. Local authorities are well-placed to implement this, through their various services such as adult education, culture and heritage and traditional education.

For effective delivery of net zero, citizens must be able to trust newly-established skills and standards. The decarbonisation of homes in particular requires that consumers trust that changes are in their best interests and are completed to a high standard. Already, Citizens Advice, Which?, Aldersgate Group and the Federation of Master Builders have expressed concern that consumers find home decarbonisation plans confusing and unreliable.<sup>1</sup> We recommend that a consumer information hub should be established for net zero, to which local authorities must be a key partner. Local authorities are a broker of trust for citizens and businesses when it comes to new standards, accreditations and information, and should therefore act as the face of net zero for the public.

To undertake these roles and responsibilities, local authorities require the appropriate mandate, skilled staff and funds from central government, in co-ordination with a net zero delivery authority.

### **How clear are the expectations about the role of local authorities?**

The current absence of key strategies limits the clarity of expectations about the role of local authorities, particularly the Heat and Buildings Strategy. Recent strategies such as the Energy White Paper (2020), Ten Point Plan (2020), National Infrastructure Strategy (2020) and Hydrogen Strategy (2021) reference local authorities, but are light on detail about the nature of their roles and how they will be expected to carry them out. For example, the commitment that local authorities will designate heat network zones by 2025 is not expanded upon to explain how this will be co-ordinated.<sup>2</sup> To meet the UK's 2050 target, the role of local authorities must be more clearly defined as a matter of urgency.<sup>3</sup> This must be accompanied by the tools to allow them to carry out these roles, including the requisite funding.

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<sup>1</sup> [Citizens Advice \(2021\) Decarbonisation of 29 million homes at risk due to significant gaps in net-zero plans.](#)

<sup>2</sup> HM Government (2020) Energy White Paper, p.115.

<sup>3</sup> [Policy Connect \(2019\) Uncomfortable Home Truths: why Britain urgently needs a low carbon heat strategy, p.32.](#)

### **What are the priorities for change or clarification to align the national planning framework with net zero?**

The National Planning Policy Framework stipulates that plan-making should “promote a sustainable pattern of development that seeks to: meet the development needs of their area; align growth and infrastructure; improve the environment; mitigate climate change (including by making effective use of land in urban areas) and adapt to its effects.”<sup>4</sup> This must be extended to include a Net Zero Test, to ensure decisions are compatible with legislated emissions targets, as suggested by the CCC.<sup>5</sup> Whilst the Framework makes references to “low carbon” measures, it does not explicitly recognise the UK’s 2050 net zero target. The urgency of this target means the Framework’s guidance should be clarified and orientated towards the 2050 target as a matter of priority.

### **How is central government co-ordinating its engagement with local government on net zero?**

Many local authorities have made declarations of climate emergency which have not been followed by substantial action. The short-lived nature of policies such as the Green Homes Grant demonstrate a lack of co-ordination in the engagement and messaging local authorities receive from central government regarding net zero. Anecdotal evidence from our inquiry shows that very few local authorities have a sustainability team or staff with expertise in this area.

To deliver net zero on time, engagement between central and local government must embody two key features. It must centre two-way communication and provide guaranteed policies local authorities can depend upon to plan. Therefore, government must adopt a whole-systems, cross-departmental approach to policymaking to deliver net-zero targets effectively and consistently across the UK. This requires buy-in and alignment across all Whitehall departments, devolved administrations, local and combined authorities. Engagement would be most effectively co-ordinated via an independent delivery body, with a principal-agent relationship with government and ministerial accountability.

### **What role can local community groups play in helping local authorities achieve their net zero ambitions?**

Local community groups can play a crucial role in this. They should take a leading role in citizen assemblies, which should define how the decarbonisation of homes is undertaken after the model of the Climate Assembly UK. Consulting meaningfully and iteratively with community groups will help ensure significant changes are accepted and supported by the public. In this role, local community groups can also use this forum to feed back to local authorities and the delivery authority when consumer concerns and challenges arise in the transition.

Community groups can also play a role in a consumer information hub for net zero, which would provide information about net zero, consumer protections and offer tailored advice. Such a service would work regionally via local authorities, community groups and local enterprise partnerships, all of which could inform the work of this service according to local priorities and make trusted links with hard-to-reach groups.

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2021) National Planning Policy Framework, p.6.

<sup>5</sup> Climate Change Committee (2021) Progress in Reducing Emissions: 2021 Progress Report to Parliament, p.157.