Parliamentary Inquiry: Building support for the energy transition

Energy Security and Net Zero Committee

08.04.25

About Us

The Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) is a registered charity (charity 298740) dedicated to supporting individuals and organisations across the UK to tackle the climate emergency and end the suffering caused by cold homes. For over 45 years, we have been at the forefront of pioneering and supporting community-led action on energy by sharing our expertise, practical experience, and policy insights.

Our work spans direct support for communities and individuals, alongside rigorous research and analysis to inform local and national policy development and implementation. With a unique combination of community engagement, technical knowledge, and research expertise, we offer a multifaceted perspective on the energy system.

We have a record of projects which engage communities in respect of various aspects of the energy transition, including in respect of civic climate action by parish councils, renewable energy deployment, domestic retrofit and engaging previously disinterested communities to take up heat pumps. We therefore have insights into community engagement in respects of these aspects of the government's agenda.

CSE's central argument

Reaching net zero will require a wholesale adoption of renewable technologies and the development of a smarter, more flexible energy system, but the barriers to the energy transition are not primarily technological.

All the technologies required to reach net zero are already available. Instead, it is people's acceptance, understanding and use of these technologies that will ultimately determine the speed of change, as well as the development of effective markets and regulatory frameworks that build trust and drive adoption. In confirmation, the Climate Change Committee[1] advise that behaviour change plays a role in two thirds of emissions reduction required for net zero.

To ensure the net zero transition happens we need better public understanding and acceptance of the changes, costs and opportunities ahead from everyone in society. Unlocking behavioural change and increasing uptake of renewable technologies will depend on individuals and communities adjusting our individual and collective behaviours, making different choices in what we buy and invest in, giving consent for changes to the buildings and landscapes where we live and work and accepting the need for energy system transformation.

Given the scale and pace of change now required to achieve our emission reduction commitments —and the fact that many of the 'easy wins' have already been secured—it is imperative that the government develops a comprehensive strategy to build informed public consent for the more difficult changes coming.

The government should urgently develop a national communications strategy that:

- **Clearly explains the benefits of the low-carbon transition and what it means for people, their homes, communities, jobs, industry.**

[1] Progress-in-reducing-emissions-2021-Report-to-Parliament.pdf

- **Builds trust and public consent for the changes we need through transparent messaging.**
- **Combats misinformation, promotes positive, solution-focused narratives and campaigns and prompts action.**
- **Aligns the messaging of different Government policies and initiatives including the Warm Homes Plan and the Local Power Plan.**

Research from Britain Talks Climate[2] shows that people from all socio-economic backgrounds are concerned about climate change to a lesser or greater extent. There is extremely low public support for less action on climate change from government, indicating that policymaking needs to catch up with public desire. Our view, therefore, is that more assertive communications on the governments climate policies could leverage the widespread public support that is already present.

The Britain Talks Climate research indicates areas of common ground across all segments of society, narratives that are likely to be universally resonant, but also some narratives which could sow division. It is essential that government devise a communications strategy using and building on informed research, insights and analysis – including from BTC.

1. Has the Government properly explained the potential benefits of the energy transition to the average citizen?

Not fully.

Whilst we strongly support many of the government's policy reforms to drive the energy transition, including the 2030 clean energy mission, the planned approach to grid reinforcement, the emerging Warm Homes Plan and approach to heat decarbonisation, the overall approach of the government has tended to be siloed and technocratic.

Aside from high-level statements from individual politicians, content in the manifesto and technical policy consultations, there has been little in the way of accessible public information promoting the government's policy agenda, explaining the benefits of the energy transition. Except for the launch of GB Energy, there have been no significant government sponsored communications campaigns reaffirming why these energy system changes are needed, linking to the widespread public concern about climate change found across all socio-demographic segments of the population.

Where public communication campaigns have been evident, they have tended to be siloed, for instance the recent Great Grid Upgrade campaign, and there is no sign of the holistic communications strategy which we think is necessary. There has so far been no coordinated government messaging about the changes and choices people will need to make to achieve net zero.

[2] Wang, S., Corner, A., and Nicholls, J. (2020). Britain Talks Climate: A toolkit for engaging the British public on climate change. Oxford: Climate Outreach. https://climateoutreach.org/reports/britain-talks-climate/

Overall, whilst the evidence is clear[3] that the energy transition is a huge opportunity for economic growth and many policy initiatives driving the energy transition can deliver material benefits to the public, these benefits have not been fully conveyed to the public.

Where there has been clear government leadership and positive messaging—such as on the clean energy plan and the benefits of renewable energy for energy security and cost reduction—these messages, combined with the recent energy price crisis, have resonated with the public. This has helped establish a broad public narrative that moving away from fossil fuels will enhance the UK's overall energy security.

However, the 7th Carbon Budget highlights that an even more compelling narrative could be communicated—one that directly links the energy transition to long-term reductions in household energy bills, once the upfront investment costs are covered:

- Transitioning to net-zero would cut average household energy bills by £700 and household motoring costs by a similar amount.
- By 2040, replacing gas generation with renewables will start to deliver reductions in the cost of electricity, which could be passed on to customers.
- The transition represents an opportunity to reduce fuel poverty in the UK, reducing the number of households in fuel poverty by 77% by 2050 compared to 2025.

This narrative has not been told.

The energy transition has the potential to give rise to significant broader co-benefits beyond reducing domestic energy costs: reduced air pollution, improved health outcomes and reduced NHS spending. Analysis[4] by the Institute of Health Equity suggests that Illnesses linked to cold, damp and dangerous homes cost the NHS more than £2.5 billion a year.

2. Is there a clear understanding of the costs of the energy transition to householders and businesses?

The relative public silence from the government around its net zero policies, their benefits and costs of the transition has enabled a narrative to develop, false in our view, that the UK cannot afford the energy transition.

In fact, the latest estimate from the Climate Change Committee[5] suggests that achieving net zero would cost just 0.2% of GDP to 2050, £4bn per year. This is 73% less than they thought it would cost 5 years ago. By comparison, in 2022 -23 during the energy price crisis the government spent £12 Bn paying domestic energy bills through the energy bills support

[3]Chris Skidmore - Independent Review of Net Zero https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63c0299ee90e0771c128965b/mission-zero-independent-review.pdf

[4] Fuel Poverty, Cold Homes and Health Inequalities in the UK - IHE

[5] Seventh Carbon Budget – Climate Change Committee - www.theccc.org.uk/publication/the-seventh-carbon-budget/

scheme[6]. Decarbonising our energy system would insulate us from those price spikes in the future.

There is a widespread expectation across the energy industry that network costs will need to increase under RIIO T3[7] & ED3[8] to deliver the infrastructure needed for Clean Power 2030 and whole-system decarbonisation longer term. There is an expectation that increasing renewables on the system will drive down cost of generation sufficiently to compensate for higher network costs, but this needs more detailed analysis and evidence. To avoid potential public backlash against increased network involvement costs, there should be transparency from Government around the analysis and evidence that exists to show that prices to consumers will fall in future by enabling more renewables on our grid.

3. Is there a need for public campaigns to counter the anti-net zero narrative?

Yes.

It is revealing that despite clear evidence[9] that net zero would drive economic growth, create skilled jobs and tangibly benefits people's lives, and is becoming more affordable, the previous cross-party consensus in favour of net zero appears to have been lost.

The government's relative public silence on many of its positive policy changes has furthermore allowed myths and disinformation to spread, for instance what appeared to be an organised media campaign[10] against heat pumps. In this respect, we welcome the recent announcement of a government sponsored heat pump campaign, but a proactive strategy is necessary from the outset linked to the government's agenda, not ad hoc and late approaches to limit damage.

The government's approach to heat networks is similarly technocratic. Whilst we strongly support the emerging heat network zoning regime, and the recent consultations on the regulation of heat networks, a proactive communications campaign is now needed to build public understanding of what heat networks are and why they should want to connect to one. The move away from gas central heating where individual consumers have choice in a mature market, to a planned heat network where no choice or competition exists, and where for some new homes they have to connect, is significant and potentially highly unpopular. It is open to a similar negative campaign which could derail the government's

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[6]The cost of the Government's energy support policies - https://obr.uk/box/the-cost-of-the-governments-energy-support-policies/#:~:text=the%20energy%20bills%20support%20scheme,cost%20%C2%A32.9%20billion%3B%20and

[7] RIIO-T3 Business Plan - www.nationalgrid.com/media-centre/press-releases/riio-t3-business-plan-published-framework-deliver-most-significant-step-forward-uks-transmission

[8] Framework consultation: electricity distribution price control (ED3) - www.ofgem.gov.uk/consultation/framework-consultation-electricity-distribution-price-control-ed3

[9]Mission Zero – Independent Review of Net Zero https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63c0299ee90e0771c128965b/mission-zero-independent-review.pdf

[10] https://news.sky.com/story/campaigns-of-misinformation-around-heat-pumps-says-energy-minister-amid-record-number-of-installations-13052428

programme, yet we are aware of no communications or engagement strategy to complement the governments regulatory changes.

4. How should the Government be more positively engaging the public with this goal?

We are not qualified to advise how government should engage with the public across the full scope of the energy sector's transition to net zero, but we do have direct experience of how community engagement can support the delivery of specific elements of it.

Building public support for renewable energy and initiating community energy projects

The Clean Power plan targets decarbonising our electricity system by 2030, doubling onshore wind and quadrupling solar. But how do we accelerate renewable energy deployment at this pace without incurring a backlash from local communities?

The Local Power Plan proposes upscaling the community energy sector, but how do we help communities to take the first step, when renewable energy is often (incorrectly) perceived as controversial and unpopular?

Our engagement approach Future Energy Landscapes[11] (FEL) has proven to be effective in answering both those questions, supporting local communities to initiate discussions about potential community energy projects and local authorities and their communities to develop ambitious plans for renewable energy deployment, all while maintaining community support.

Through collaborative workshops and ongoing engagement, FEL facilitates local communities to create renewable energy plans that they support, bringing people together early in the planning process, listening to their ideas and concerns about how renewable energy might be developed in their local area and explicitly considering landscape impacts.

The results of this engagement approach speak for themselves. Of thirteen FEL workshops in 2022:

- 85% of participating communities supported renewable energy projects that could meet or exceed their annual electricity needs.
- 62% expressed majority support for onshore wind.

Community energy groups are already using this open-source approach to initiate possible projects, independently of CSE[12].

FEL works because it localises the distant problem of how to decarbonise our energy system down to the scale of a community: "*How can we generate more of the energy we use in this parish from renewables?"* These narratives are attractive in the current energy and cost of living crisis, and we've found them to be resonant in every community we've worked in.

[11] Future Energy Landscapes – Community Engagement Approach - www.cse.org.uk/my-community/future-energy-landscapes/

[12] https://esd.energy/events/future-energy-landscapes/

Building these narratives into your communications strategy for the Local Power Plan and promoting these sort of engagement approaches, can help make the Clean Energy Mission a reality.

Building Understanding and Trust Around Heat Pumps

Our Bristol Heat Pump Ready[13] project engaged the public around the potential to install heat pumps. We found little upfront demand for heat pumps among homeowners, and little knowledge. Thus far the Government's strategy has not been successful in creating widespread awareness of the benefits of heat pumps.

The recent "Feel All Warm and Fuzzy Inside" campaign by DESNZ is a welcome step towards meeting people where they are with approachable language and creative ways of communicating. We welcome this campaign to promote a more general understanding of what heat pumps are, the benefits they can offer, and that this is a technology the government supports.

Our work has found that households need time to build an understanding of a new technology and make an informed decision. Replacement heating systems tend to be distress purchases, brought about by the failure of the previous system. Therefore, having a background understanding that there is a viable low carbon alternative to gas central heating is positive for when the current boiler breaks down and a plan must be made for its replacement. Bristol Heat Pump Ready also identified a need to make information about heat pump offers more accessible and to carry out myth busting.

Our key learning is that whilst emerging regulation is well developed to favour heat pumps (and heat networks) as the default choice, we are still early on the technology adoption curve. A communications campaign on its own therefore, whilst helpful, is unlikely to be sufficient. Government should concentrate on improving the quality of installations undertaken and adopting performance standards to build trust, so that there is less risk of negative stories gaining traction.

Integrating Climate and Energy into the Education System

The education system offers a huge, largely untapped opportunity to teach the voters, workforce and consumers of the future key facts about the climate crisis and its implications, build support for the changes we need and indirectly influence children's parents and guardians.

CSE has a history of engaging with and working with young people. Our most successful project within this has been our Bright Green Future[14] environmental leadership programme, working with 16–19-year-olds across the UK since 2016. Targeting young people from communities under-represented in the environmental sector, it provides a unique space for 'green career' discovery and now comprises an Alumni Network approaching 400 young people across the UK.

We would therefore urge government to:

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[13] Bristol Heat Pump Ready - www.cse.org.uk/my-community/community-projects/bristol-heat-pump-ready/

[14] Bright Green Future - www.bright-green-future.org.uk/

- **provide training and support for the new school** Sustainability Leads as part of its new Sustainability and Climate Change strategy. Alongside this there needs to be a cross-curricular approach to climate change education from an early stage, to build carbon literacy and provide young people with the skills, knowledge, confidence and voice to participate in decision-making and become advocates for a fair transition to net zero.

- **re-establish a Citizens Assembly (or comparable forum) to enable youth voices in our transition to net zero.** We would advocate for specific support within this to ensure young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have the resource and agency to take part.

Beyond delivering benefits for young people, there are critical skills shortage across sectors which are vital to the delivery of the energy transition. For example, to decarbonise our electricity system and deliver the clean energy plan, the government is planning a major expansion of grid infrastructure[15], adding to the already global demand for skilled high voltage electrical engineers, but staff are leaving the sector at a faster rate than joining it.

Similarly, delivery of the warm homes plan will require the retrofit sector to skill and scale up. To reach net zero, the UK needs to retrofit 29 million homes before 2050[16], and at least 15 million before 2030 yet we do not currently have the skilled workforce to deliver this. Without solving these skills shortages, the government's plans seem undeliverable.

A major opportunity is being missed to integrate climate considerations across the syllabus to encourage young people into these sectors and simultaneously build understanding of and support for the energy transition.

Leveraging existing Local Democratic Forums

There are missed opportunities to engage the public on climate through existing local democratic forums, such as parish councils and neighbourhood planning groups. Thousands of groups are writing neighbourhood plans nationwide, with no encouragement from government to address climate change as an issue.

CSE has delivered parish climate action days[17] and ran a programme for "Low Carbon" neighbourhood plans[18], exploring how parish councils and neighbourhood planning groups can take climate action. We have found that civic society is keen to take action on the climate, and we welcome the government's acknowledgement of this through the local power plan.

In the light of government action on climate, such small civic initiatives can sound insignificant, but they are key to normalising public discussion of climate change, building

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[15] www.ofgem.gov.uk/consultation/framework-consultation-electricity-distribution-price-control-ed3

[16] https://ukgbc.org/resources/database-on-residential-properties/#:~:text=With%20possibly%20the%20oldest%20and,homes%20in%20the%20next%20decade.

[17] Parish and Town Council Climate Action Days - www.cse.org.uk/news/town-and-parish-climate-action-days-boost-motivation/

[18] Low Carbon Neighbourhood Planning - www.cse.org.uk/my-community/engagement-planning/neighbourhood-plans/

public support for the government's policy agenda and turning public concern about climate change into action.