

Editorial:

Governance factors on the road to net zero

Tim O’Riordan and Chizitera Pennington

Abstract: In 2021, the UK Government released its Net Zero Strategy, which laid out how the country would meet its legally binding carbon-based emissions target of no net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Recent developments have shown the importance of governance in the delivery of this target. These include the 2022 Committee on Climate Change progress report to Parliament and the 2023 independent review, led by Chris Skidmore MP (a former Energy Minister), which outlined that there was further work to be done at all governance levels and that all relevant stakeholder groups who will be involved in or are affected by the transition should be mobilised to ensure that the net zero target is met.

The British Academy Net Zero policy programme is examining net zero from a governance perspective and commissioned a series of essays on the topic. Emerging themes from the essays and programme emphasise the important role that leaders and people will play in net zero governance.

Keywords: Governance, leadership, people

Note on the authors: Timothy O’Riordan is Professor Emeritus of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia.

Chizitera Pennington is a Senior Policy Adviser at the British Academy.

A governance lens is crucial to examining the process of transition to net zero

The common thread to the work presented in this journal edition is the use of a governance lens to examine the issues around deliverance of the net zero agenda. Here it is understood to be the processes and activities, actors and institutions which include (but go beyond) the government.¹ It ‘refers to activities backed by shared goals that may or may not derive from legal or formally prescribed responsibilities Governance, in other words, is a more encompassing phenomenon than government. It embraces governmental institutions, but it also subsumes informal, non-governmental mechanisms.’²

Review of the policy landscape

The British Academy’s ability to marshal the deep and expansive insights of the SHAPE (social sciences, humanities and the arts for people and the environment) disciplines to explore what underpins functioning societies and multi-level governance systems makes it well positioned to explore this issue of net zero and how effective governance systems can help to deliver on the policy goals. The programme’s ambition is to use these SHAPE insights to produce policy analyses and outputs that contribute to the delivery of UK commitments to achieving net zero by 2050.

The Government’s Net Zero Strategy has highlighted areas that it assesses require transformation to deliver net zero. These cover emissions reductions across sectors of the economy (such as buildings, transport, land use, and power); and support for the transition through mobilising finance and by improving a number of governance systems, structures, and approaches.

Critiques of the approach outlined in the strategy focus on the lack of integration and connectedness between policy strands and departmental coordination. One of many examples is the delay in ensuring that ‘all new houses built in England meet full net zero standards for internal insulation and energy efficiency’.³ This includes the installation of non-fossil-fuelled heating and cooling machinery. Wider examples of the underdevelopment of net zero governance mechanisms have been brought to the fore by the Climate Change Committee and by Chris Skidmore MP. Both have published some suggestions on improving governance, such as calling for the Government to agree, define, and

¹ Kooiman, J. (1993: 2)

² Rosenau, J. (1992: 4)

³ BEIS & DESNZ (2022)

publish clear roles and responsibilities. While such a change could have an impact on governance, there is more work to be done on exploring and developing practical policy lessons that address the urgency of net zero while creating links and drawing on the strengths of the multitude of stakeholders involved, such as policymakers, people, businesses, the research community, and civil society.

There is still much to be done. The Institute of Government (2023) comments:

The most straightforward justification for an industrial strategy approach to business is found in the enormous investments needed for reaching net zero, an investment agenda that needs clear, consistent, and committed signals to business over a long period of time. The department in charge of that needs to have clout and business nous to stand up to the Treasury, bring energy users and producers onside, and understand how investment really works.⁴

Also, there are signs of political backtracking as the election-sensitive political parties eye warily the murmurings from the electorate over the apparent cost of getting to net zero. Key variables here are the rising cost of living, sky-high bills for internationally-price-set energy, persistent inflation, and the dates for potentially contentious policies regarding the prohibition of petrol and diesel vehicles and gas-based home heating. Not thoroughly involving people in the policy-making process or making them aware of the costs and co-benefits of the transition is a major failing of current net zero governance. People are not being fully integrated into the governance system, and the essays that follow help to explain why.

Overview of the contributing essays

The collection of five essays which follow were commissioned through a competitive process run by the British Academy. We are hugely grateful to the writing teams who generated these documents and for their willingness to engage in revision and coordination. The five essays provide a particularly important compilation of relevant background material on net zero governance. The essays also offer a forensic critique of some of the key struggles and constructive lessons that can be used to further progress in this vital arena.

We look first at the two contributions on housing: one on affordable housing authored by Jing Zhao, and the other on residential buildings contributed by Ludovica Gazze. Their message is clear and practical. Getting the UK housing stock to low carbon and thermal comfort (as cooling will become more important over the coming two decades)

⁴Institute of Government (2023)

will be challenging. There is limited capacity in the maintenance and heating trades to deliver either on the scale or the cost in ways that will be affordable and workable. However, these two papers indicate that a mix of improved engagement with the public, coordinated supply chains and delivery, and suitable provision for housing redesign will help prevent crisis in the coming twenty years. Ludovica Gazze summarised the position:

The Government needs to spur action to decarbonise homes across several temporal horizons and domains. Short-term action is needed to ensure that different policy objectives do not jeopardise longer-term net zero efforts, for example when mitigating the effects of increased international energy prices on families’ expenditures. At the same time, coordination and planning are required to put in place holistic, enabling policies that leverage low-hanging fruit, such as investments by the able-to-pay segment, while preparing a path for everyone to realise energy savings investments.⁵

Jing Zhao echoes this point:

For social and affordable tenants, a greater proportion of the residents are senior citizens, those who have a long-term illness or disability and those who are looking after a family. They represent some of the most vulnerable groups of people in the UK, facing rising energy bills and the cost-of-living crisis. However, more often than not, they do not have the opportunity to choose a low-carbon home, nor do they have sufficient means or control over what low-carbon technology is to be included in their homes. As a result, they are often in need of more systematic support to fully benefit from a low-carbon home.⁶

Both authors make sensible policy recommendations. They connect variable price incentives, to the introduction of smart meters, to local educational programmes, coupled with phased neighbourhood support. They also see the scope for training a generation of heating engineers with the skills of efficient delivery and sensitive householder engagement. There is also a wider governance issue of coordination and accountability.

The other papers pick up on a key theme of the programme and that is the important role of people in governance. Supportive behaviour towards bettering oneself and one’s neighbours as well as one’s offspring depends on collective commitment. There is an exuberance in collaborating. People are more willing to sacrifice when they feel supported and part of a wider social norm – they note that their friends and next-door neighbours are also pulling their weight. This feeling for low carbon and its association with caring for nature is nurtured by solidarity and proof of fairness in treatment. This could mean that for many the notion of fairness applies to high carbon emitters paying for their emissions, and the frugal or carbon creators who are unable to pay being compensated. This

⁵ Gazze L. (2023)

⁶ Zhao, J. (2023)

is a long way from being the case right now. But it may have to come about that high emitters become the focus for helping to finance the transition to low carbon.

Two papers address this theme. One, written by Paulina Baranova, looks at businesses where net zero approaches could be set in a collaborative and policy setting. At present, this is not the case:

Despite *place* being identified as one of five foundations of the national and local industrial strategies, business support provision across the regions remains largely ‘place-blind’ Net zero business support needs to become an integral part of the Local Industrial Strategies and Strategic Economic Plans An integrated model of support services that adopts a holistic approach to addressing business growth as well as carbon reduction challenges is likely to equip businesses better for the net zero transition.⁷

These conclusions indicate that there could be more collaboration where businesses could profitably work together with supportive local communities. The authors point to a low level of connectedness and mutual support, which is weakening both investment and resolve at an early stage of the net zero transition.

Turning to whole communities, the paper compiled by the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformation (CAST) offers the ingredients for successful mutual gain:

... policymakers must integrate multiple approaches at different levels, including individual, community and population levels. ... ‘Downstream’ approaches that focus solely on changing individual behaviour are less effective than ‘upstream’ approaches that remove contextual barriers, such as an absence of feasible low-carbon transport options in many communities. Targeting approaches to different needs and key decision-points, alongside an ongoing process of public engagement is crucial and a process that needs to be co-led by policymakers and other stakeholders.

... a government-led public engagement strategy should provide coordination and joined-up thinking to develop genuine societal dialogue on net zero that combines existing approaches (e.g. communications, consultations, surveys) with new forms of participation (assemblies, community engagement).⁸

This is sound advice. There is plenty of research supporting these forms of people-centred and nurturing active engagement, as referenced in their contribution. Broader research under the British Academy programme has explored a variety of ways for the Government to engage with people. Some of these methods use non-traditional and innovative approaches, such as ‘climathons’, which allow for the integration of important voices, knowledge, and the enhancement of local collaboration.⁹ The CAST paper

⁷Baranova, P. (2023)

⁸Verfuert C. *et al.* (2023)

⁹Maye, D. *et al.* (2023)

and our other research also show that not doing so will be both counterproductive for net zero buy-in and eventually politically contentious.

The paper also outlines the importance of the other benefits that will arise from the transition and how it is essential that policymakers work on solutions that can go beyond climate change and address other issues that people care about, such as the cost of living and biodiversity, as doing so not only helps in tackling those issues but also in fostering public involvement and support for net zero policies.

The final paper, led by Tom Bedford and his colleagues, looks at four contrasting experiments in local net zero governance in the Midlands. They reinforce the findings of the CAST group in that centralised approaches alienate keen participants and lead to dismay, disarray, and inertia. The examples highlighted in this paper show how creative leadership can enable considerable participation and learning.

Our research indicates that place-based local collaborative leadership is an important dimension to ensure a just transition (recognising the procedural and recognitional elements). A dialogic approach can potentially ensure that there is a flow of information and knowledge between actors at the local scale and better scales, particularly mitigating the harmful impacts of the transition of particularly vulnerable groups. It can also help with the distributional impacts of the transition, ensuring that local communities could benefit from the deployment and installation of technologies. A collaborative approach has the potential to reimagine community consent for projects by centring them in the heart of local decision-making.¹⁰

The paper also argues that central Government should provide a clear framework for local actors that supports them in using collaborative governance approaches.

These five contributions provide illuminating examples of the kinds of action-based research at the heart of the net zero struggle. They show that local initiatives with good leadership backed by policy support and appropriate incentives to scale up, could begin local journeys towards net zero and fill current gaps in policy shaping and delivery.

Emerging themes

Exploring the issues posed by the net zero agenda through a governance lens highlights the complexity society faces, such as navigating complex funding and planning landscapes, and sustaining public support for the goal.

Considering this, the insights from these papers and the British Academy’s Net Zero programme point towards two critical factors that underpin governance around net zero: leadership and people. Local councils and regional administrations illustrate the

¹⁰Bedford, T. *et al.* (2023)

leadership challenge. They play an essential part in tailoring national-level strategies to the needs of their constituents and in leading on place-based net zero efforts. However, issues such as ambiguity over roles and responsibilities, ineffective coordination, and conflicting regulatory goals hamper such efforts. There is an urgent need to get this right, and research under the programme has shown that effective leadership across all governance levels can be delivered through the creation and support of an ambitious vision and timeframes, and collaboration amongst relevant stakeholders.

Alongside leadership, the programme outlines that people have a significant role to play in the transition to net zero. Polling research indicates that there is broad public support for net zero, but there is limited room for complacency, as people's enthusiasm can rise or fall depending on wider social and political contexts. Lessons identified in the papers presented here provide useful starting points for policymakers on these issues as they continue to push forward on net zero.

References

- Baranova, P. (2023), 'Place-based business support towards net zero: enabling through the place-policy-practice nexus', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s4): 57–95. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s4.057>
- Bedford, T., Catney, P. & Robinson, Z. (2023), 'Going down the local: the challenges of place-based net zero governance', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s4): 125–156. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s4.125>
- BEIS (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) & DESNZ (Department for Energy Security and Net Zero) (2022), 'Warm Home Discount: eligibility statement (England and Wales)'. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/warm-home-discount-eligibility-statement-england-and-wales/warm-home-discount-eligibility-statement-england-and-wales>
- CCC (Climate Change Committee) (2022), *2022 Progress Report to Parliament. The CCC's Annual Assessment of UK Progress in Reducing Emissions* <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/2022-progress-report-to-parliament/>
- Gazze, L. (2023), 'Achieving net zero goals in residential buildings', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s4): 35–56. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s4.035>
- Institute of Government (2023), 'Net zero and devolution: the role of England's mayors in the climate transition'. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/net-zero-devolution>
- Kooiman, J. (Ed.) (1993), *Modern Governance* (SAGE, Newbury Park, CA).
- Lemos, M. & Agrawal, A. (2006), 'Environmental governance', *Annual Review of Environmental Resources*, 31: 297–325. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.energy.31.042605.135621>
- Maye, D., Simmonds, P., Garner, A., Ingram, J. & Raseta, S. (2022), 'Co-designing sustainable food futures: using climate assemblies to build shared agri-food visions for net-zero', Summary of research findings. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4306/Rural_Climathons_policy_brief_updated_1.pdf
- Rosenau, J. (1992), 'Governance, order and change in world politics', in Eds J. Rosenau & E.-O. Czempiel *Governance without Government* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press). <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511521775>

- Skidmore, C., Rt. Hon. (January 2023), *Mission Zero: Independent Review of the UK Government’s Approach to Delivering Zero*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1128689/mission-zero-independent-review.pdf
- Verfuether, C., Demski, C., Capstick, S., Whitmarsh L. & Poortinga, W. (2023), ‘A people-centred approach is needed to meet net zero goals’, *Journal of the British Academy* 11(s4): 97–124. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s4.097>
- Zhao, J. (2023), ‘Implementing net zero affordable housing – towards a human-centred approach’, *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s4): 9–34. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s4.009>

To cite the article: O’Riordan, T. and Pennington, C. (2023), ‘Editorial: Governance factors on the road to net zero’, *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s4): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s4.001>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk