

Empowering climate action through local authorities:

Opportunities and challenges in the energy transition

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Foreword

If we as a society don't get it right, communities across Britain will be left behind in the energy transition. Towns which already struggle to find good, solid careers for local, young people could struggle even more.

If we don't get it right, poor quality housing stock will slip further behind – having a massive impact on the quality and longevity of life. Neighbourhoods with already poor air quality could be left behind as wealthier neighbourhoods quickly get off-street electric vehicle charging points and more affluent residents quickly adopt electric vehicles.

The Electricity System Operator (ESO) wants to understand what needs to happen to bring about a fair energy transition, with low carbon and high quality of life for all. So, we're conducting several pieces of research to help us think about what needs to happen next to support communities to transform, contribute to and benefit from meeting the UK's climate targets.

Recently, we published [Empowering climate action – inspiring and supporting consumer participation in the energy transition](#). Through that public opinion research, it is clear that the British public is changing how it thinks about climate change and the environment. Seventy one percent of the public say that climate change is one of (if not the most) pressing issues of our time. Encouragingly, 63% of the public want to know more about how they can play a part in tackling climate change.

No one individual or entity can deliver the transformation needed to meet the UK's climate change targets. Instead, we need an ecosystem of organisations and communities to meet these ambitions – including the energy sector, national and local decision makers, and each of us as citizens. This ecosystem will evolve in the future. By better understanding the ESO's place within this future ecosystem we can ensure that we design and deliver the right things to enable communities to enjoy the

benefits of a low carbon economy.

A key part of the ecosystem is the role that local authorities play. From our discussions with local authorities for this new research, it is clear that local action and inspiration can play an important role in joining up what is needed at national level, with the solutions that can best support individuals and communities across every unique corner of the country. We have heard inspiring examples of local authorities already enabling change - whether by being the link between Westminster and local communities, leading by their own actions, or by creating and mobilising local networks of people who are ready to engage in climate action. We're also seeing the public and private sectors increasingly coming together to deliver local area energy plans – so that greener systems can deliver for the country and local communities.

As Great Britain's Electricity System Operator, we sit at the heart of the energy system. Part of our role is enabling transformation – in industry and society - to build a greener energy system for the future. Our annual [Future Energy Scenarios \(FES\)](#) outline four different, credible pathways for the future of energy between now and 2050. Every future pathway sees some level of societal change compared to today.

It is clear that local authorities are already playing an important role in climate action, and in unlocking the broader benefits that climate action can deliver for society. In this report, we have set out the opportunities and challenges that local authorities face in further enabling and inspiring the societal transformation needed to meet net zero emissions by 2050.



Jake Rigg

*Corporate Affairs Director
Electricity System Operator (ESO)*

Executive Summary

To meet the UK's target to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, national government and the energy sector have so far, and will continue to, play a pivotal role. But as we turn our minds to the need for behaviour change and consumer transformation in the energy transition, local authorities have a unique function to fulfil. This includes operating as important interpreters and implementers of national policy (such as to help deliver infrastructure), and in inspiring local action through education and communication tailored to local communities.

Through a series of roundtables, we spoke to a range of elected representatives and council officers across Great Britain to explore the role that local authorities can play in achieving the UK's net zero target and the energy transition. These conversations highlighted a number of opportunities and some challenges that councils face to lead climate action in their communities and unlock the broader benefits that the path to net zero creates.

Opportunities:

- **Leading by example:** Local authorities recognise that they must 'have their own house in order' on climate action, by making progress in reducing carbon emissions from their own operations. This is important to contribute towards the nation's net zero ambitions, but arguably more significantly in terms of demonstrating moral leadership ahead of engaging the public about changing their own behaviours. Where this is successful, local authorities can create powerful case studies for best practice that can be shared with peers, set an example for their electors, and influence suppliers and property developers.
- **Convening and inspiring local communities:** By acting as a convenor, local councils can empower new networks of local volunteers and engaged citizens willing to take climate and environmental action. By doing so, councils can not only enable these groups to be effective and achieve real change, but to inspire others in the community to become more active.
- **Return on investment from climate action:** Councils undertaking climate action can achieve more than just environmental benefits, but in fact secure wider economic and social value for residents too. For example, improving home insulation can improve health outcomes by making houses warmer, saving people money on their energy bills, invigorating new local industries, and nurturing education opportunities and skills. These broader benefits can also be leveraged to open broader funding opportunities for initiatives.
- **Regional collaboration:** Local authorities can increase their impact by working collaboratively with other councils to drive regional-level action. Working with neighbouring councils can help to cut costs, achieve necessary scale for larger schemes and reduce citizen confusion – especially within larger travel-to-work areas.
- **A powerful link to meet the needs of local communities:** Local authorities can act as repositories of expertise – on both the communities they serve and the transition to net zero. They are also trusted by the public more than many media sources. This makes them a powerful link between national Government and local communities, translating laws into local action and helping Government to better understand the wide-ranging needs of the public across the country.

Challenges:

- **Being early adopters of technology:** In a whole host of areas, local authorities are pioneering new technologies in the pursuit of positive climate action and local benefits. While early adoption can stimulate new industries, reduce future costs of technologies, and deliver long term benefits, it can also come with cost implications and difficulties in procuring the necessary expertise. Councils can play a key role in helping consumers become earlier adopters of technologies, for example by installing more charging points in their areas, through the planning system and within new developments. This demonstrates how councils can play a key role in supporting and empowering consumer behaviour change through their role in, and opportunities for, infrastructure provision.
- **Choosing what's effective over what's popular:** Councillors and officers talked about the difficulty of taking the most effective action on reducing emissions that also met the expectations of the public. They highlighted that some of the changes most visible to the public are not always very effective, whilst some of the most effective (such as new heating systems) are not visible at all. Reconciling these two needs is not easy, but it is vital; we know that communicating action on climate change by all tiers of government is incredibly important for motivating individual action.
- **Being held back by national policy:** Many roundtable representatives spoke of their sheer frustration at the slow pace of change in national government policy-setting, and the limitations this created at the local level (for example, in creating an ambitious Local Plan). But the urge and ability to push for faster change in some areas is balanced by a feeling of being overwhelmed at the rapid pace with which councils must absorb new policy on multiple fronts.
- **Climate ambitions curtailed without funding:** Funding was cited by local authority representatives time and time again as fundamental to delivering climate action, particularly where they are seeking to take voluntary (non-mandated) actions. Without significant, long-term investment, they argued that the role of councils in delivering change will be severely curtailed.
- **Understanding changing consumer behaviour:** Councils can play a unique role in supporting consumer participation in the energy transition, but while most local authorities have established communications functions, many lack expertise in behaviour change.

Inspiring consumer transformation

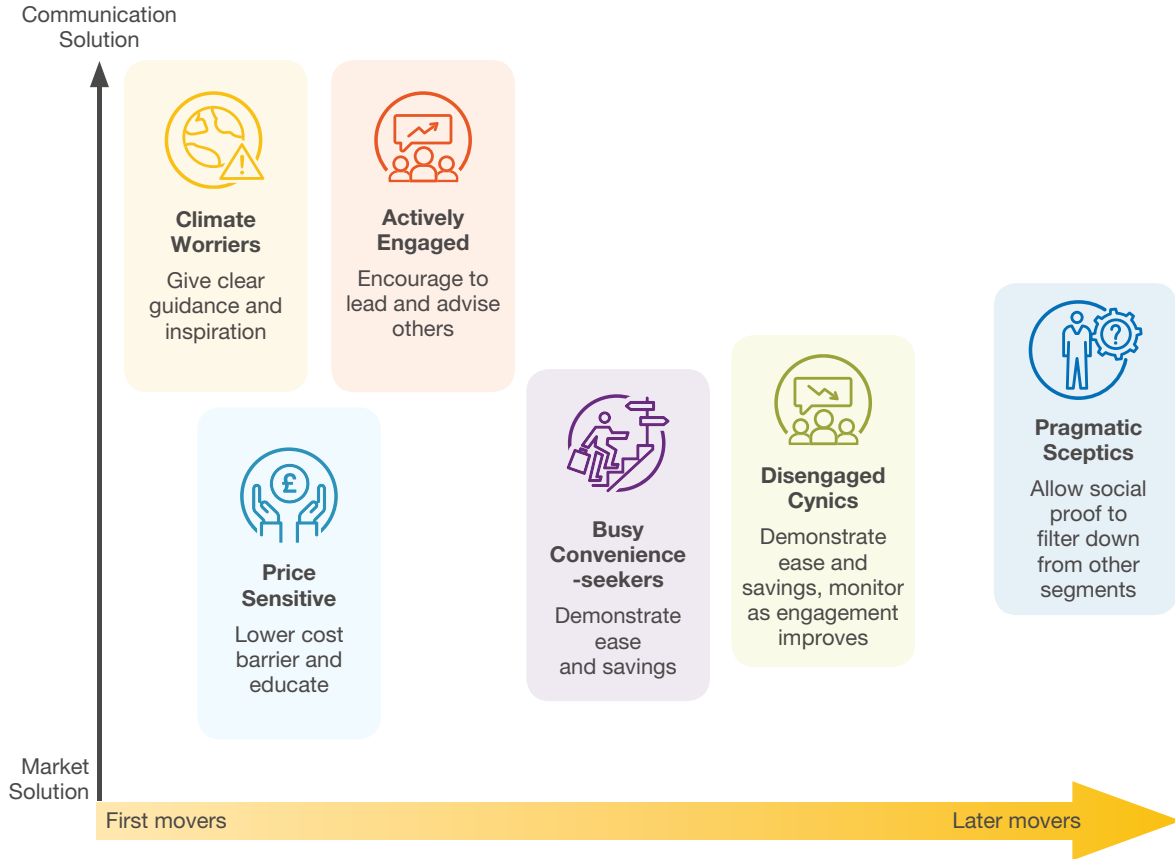
Our research into public attitudes on climate change and the energy transition provides a useful toolkit for local authorities, as they work to make the most of the opportunities and overcome the challenges that we have detailed above.

Consumers encounter barriers and motivators to climate action, which vary across the public. Our [Empowering Climate Action: Inspiring and supporting consumer participation in the energy transition](#) research identified six archetypes or 'segments' of the British population – each requiring a slightly different approach to enable and empower them to take actions that can support the UK's climate change targets, including the adoption of green home technologies and services.

To help practitioners visualise a way of engaging with different consumer segments we have produced an 'Engagement Roadmap'. In the roadmap we place each segment along a prioritisation spectrum showing the order in which each might participate in the energy transition. There is also an

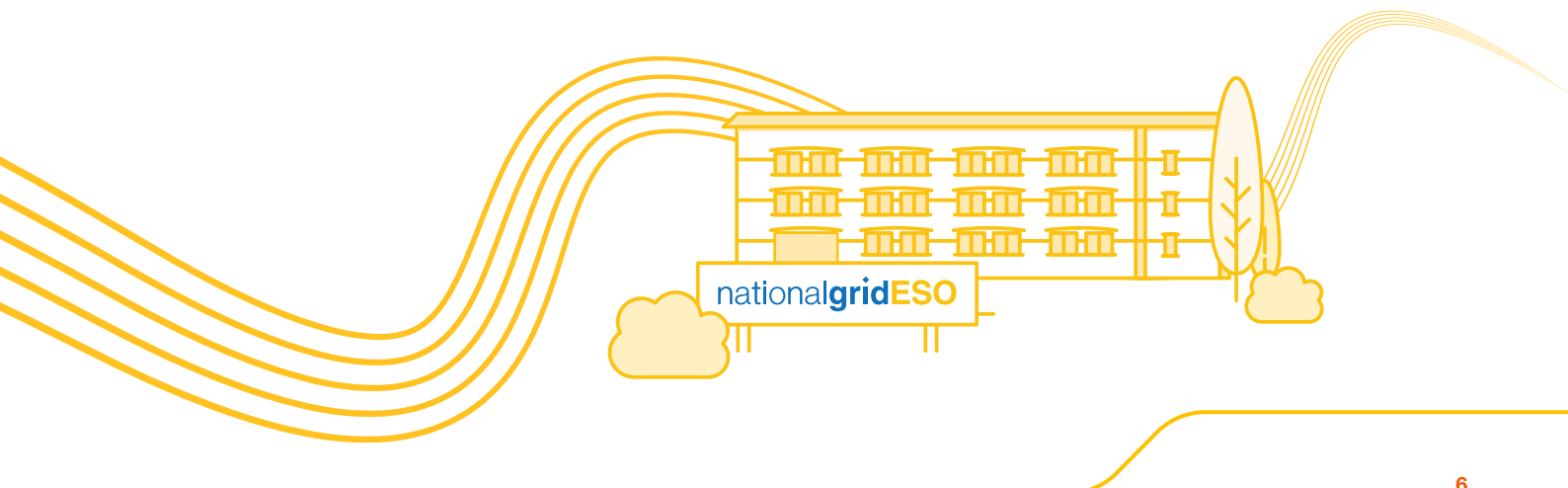
intervention spectrum that shows whether each group requires a predominantly communication or market-based solutions to encourage participation. Further information about this can be found in our previous report.

Roadmap for engaging consumers in climate action and the energy transition



While no one individual or entity can deliver the transformation needed to meet the UK’s climate change targets, local authorities can especially play a role in engaging the ‘Busy Convenience-seekers’ segment – who are otherwise less trusting of many sources of information about climate action than their peers, but display relatively high willingness to listen to their council.

There is no ‘silver bullet’ to supporting the public in the energy transition, but it is clear that local authorities already play a role in enabling and inspiring the public to take action. By navigating the challenges they face, their expertise and local knowledge can be better used to support climate action and deliver benefits across the country.



Introduction

To meet the UK's target to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, national government and the energy sector have and will continue to play a pivotal role. But as we turn our minds to the need for behaviour change and consumer transformation to support the energy transition, as described in our [Future Energy Scenarios](#), local authorities have a unique function to fulfil. They can act as important interpreters and implementers of national policy, and also in inspiring local action through education and communication tailored to local communities.

This report sets out to do three things: inform the wider energy sector about the potential contribution of local authorities to spurring climate action and the energy transition, offer some best practice examples of actions already being taken by local authorities, and translate our own consumer research insights to help local authorities keen to empower and inspire their own residents in the fight against climate change.

Over the past few months, we, with support from Public First, have published extensive opinion research on how public attitudes towards climate action vary and can be influenced, incorporating an online poll of 4,211 adults in Great Britain, which took place 10-20 August 2021, and twelve focus groups that were conducted in September 2021. This report, [Empowering climate action](#), a summary of the findings and data, is available on our website, alongside the full data set that informs the report.

To deepen our understanding of the role that local authorities can play in enabling consumer transformation, we have supplemented our consumer research by speaking to elected members and officials in more than 20 local authorities across England, Wales and Scotland

via a series of roundtable events, to gain insight into the challenges and opportunities for councils in helping to meet the UK's net zero ambitions. These events took place 12-15 October 2021. We also received guidance from the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT), who we would like to thank for their support.

There is already excellent research on the powers that local authorities have and need to deliver net zero, including from the [Climate Change Committee](#), [UK100](#) and [Ashden](#). We have sought to complement rather than replicate this, by having a specific emphasis on how the public expectations and knowledge influence the role local authorities can play.

The findings from our research with both consumers and local authorities show that the public wants and expects local authorities to play a role in tackling climate change, communicating about how the public can participate. Meanwhile, local authorities are pushing for national policy to go further and faster and allow them to showcase radical new thinking – even in the face of cost constraints - because of the resulting benefits.

This report is structured in three parts: first, we describe five areas, identified by our roundtables, in which local authorities can make a unique contribution to empowering and inspiring consumer behaviour change during the energy transition. In the second part, we turn to the five main challenges that hinder action by local authorities. The frustration caused by these constraints was palpable in our roundtables and shared by authorities of all sizes and geographies. Finally, we show how our public opinion research can help local authorities to optimise the communications and behaviour change work that they are running with their residents. Throughout the report, you will see insights from our recent public opinion research and consumer focus groups, as well as case studies and insights from our local authority roundtables.

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Leading by example

In our roundtable discussions, local authorities overwhelmingly recognised that they must ‘have their own house in order’ on climate action. By this they meant making progress in reducing carbon emissions from their own operations. This was essential not only to contribute towards the nation’s net zero ambitions, but also to demonstrate moral leadership ahead of engaging the public about changing their own behaviours to support improved climate and environmental outcomes.

“If we are going to influence consumers as local authorities, we’ve first got to get our own house in order. We’ve got to change our behaviours. I know for [the council] we’ve got to embed decarbonisation in all our policies and procedures, otherwise real change doesn’t happen.”

Climate challenge programme manager, county borough council in Wales

This recognition is driving action across a number of fronts, from reducing the emissions of council activities and embedding climate action in decision-making, to working to higher standards than legally required, such as with the creation of zero carbon council homes.

It is recognised that national government policy will be essential to encourage mass consumer uptake of energy efficiency measures. In the pathways that meet net zero in our Future Energy Scenarios, insulation in lofts and walls will need to be retrofitted in homes in the 2020s continuing to the mid-2030s. Developing zero carbon homes is an action that local authorities clearly see as an area that they can have a positive impact. We heard in our consumer focus groups that the public clearly do take note of what they see happening in new developments. This, in turn, influences individual willingness to take climate action:

“I actually don’t understand. They’re building all new houses, especially around where I live. There’s a lot of new properties being built, but they’re not actually building them with solar panels in them.”

Consumer focus group participant

By leading the way on zero carbon housing, councils hoped not only to reduce emissions in their own territory and influence consumers, but also to ‘throw down the gauntlet to private sector developers’ and create more urgency in meeting higher environmental standards.

“We’ve been looking at improving the sustainability of existing housing stock, and planning for sustainable new-build. This year we adopted a supplementary planning document which is guidance for new-builds, in terms of reducing the carbon output... All our new-builds now must have EV charging points.”

Cabinet member, district council in the Midlands

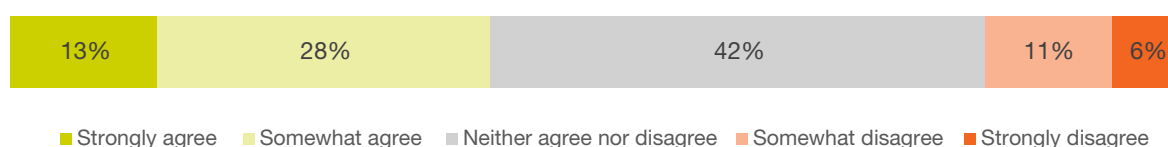
We note that, while new-build housing was the focus of most of our discussions, landlord

licensing regimes may be another area where councils can lead the way by testing and varying regulations.

The importance of local authorities playing a role in climate action through their own activities was supported by our public opinion research, which found that 42% of the public agree that their council's record on tackling climate change has a 'big impact' on how positively they view it. But it is worth noting that currently there is a low level of understanding of local authority plans and track record on climate change.

Chart 1: Importance of climate change to view of council

Whether my council has a good record on tackling climate change has a big impact on how positively I view it



Increasing the public's awareness of local authority actions to fight climate change can create powerful examples for their electors as well as influencing best practice amongst their peers, suppliers and developers. Each is capable of triggering powerful amplification effects.

Case study 1: Zero carbon homes

Local authorities are leading by example on climate change when it comes to the building of new council homes.

Wiltshire Council has declared that all new council-built properties will be constructed to 'zero carbon' standards, featuring very high levels of insulation and triple glazing. Making the houses zero carbon only costs an additional 4%.

This is part of £195m investment into building new, energy efficient council homes up to 2032. The council will also invest £50m until 2032 on improving existing council housing properties to ensure they achieve a minimum energy performance rating of B. Not only will this contribute to the council meeting its environmental ambitions, the council claims this will deliver savings of up to £600 a year for residents living in these properties.

The council will also consider other technologies to enhance these improvements and further reduce customers' energy bills, such as solar panels on roofs and battery storage, depending on the property.

Further information can be found on Wiltshire Council's [website](#).

Convening and inspiring local communities

We heard numerous examples of local councils using their convening power to establish new networks of local volunteers willing to take climate and environmental action. By doing so, councils can enable these groups to be effective and achieve real change, and to inspire others in the community to become more active.

“We’re really encouraged by the amount of people who volunteer to do things like litter-picking. They’re taking pride in their area and the more people see them out, the more conscious they are of keeping their area tidy. But also, it’s a recognition that the council can’t be everywhere.”

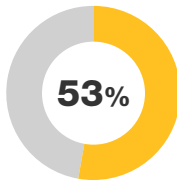
Cabinet member, District council in the East Midlands

This contribution by councils was especially valued by some of the busiest and most urban consumer segments identified in our [Empowering climate action](#) report, who were more likely to trust local authorities and believe that they had a role to play in fighting climate change. Community groups can help to break down perceptions that act as a barrier to action – for example, the belief that climate action must be disruptive, expensive or overwhelming.

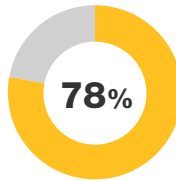
Chart 2: Barriers to climate action for consumers

The changes in the previous question are some of the options suggested to help us fight climate change. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

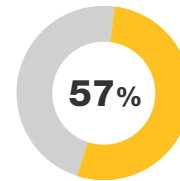
“I find it difficult to keep up with all the environmental changes I am told I need to make”



“I would make more of these types of changes if they were cheaper.”



“I would make more of these types of changes if they were less disruptive.”



Practical interventions chime well with public perceptions of the role of local authorities in fighting climate change (as consumers tended to focus on their role in recycling and information in our previous research). These are often well-tailored to help the most overwhelmed groups choose somewhere small to start their own transformation.

“I think they [local authorities] do have a role [in climate change] – educating people about the impact it’s having, and I think organising community events. They could do that.”

Consumer focus group participant

Our consumer research also found a significant divide between the most engaged and least engaged groups on climate change in how they think about climate change. The more engaged groups were more likely to think about climate change in an abstract, large-scale sense and speak about carbon emissions. The less-engaged groups focussed on waste and inefficiency. The work of community groups is often targeted effectively for these less-informed groups and may serve as a useful conduit to greater awareness, by linking action on waste to the broader climate agenda.

Case study 2: Convening communities

Local authorities are seeking to inspire individuals and volunteer groups to take action on climate change through the creation of local groups of residents.

[Climate Action Fife](#) is a partnership project between Greener Kirkcaldy, Fife Council, Fife College and Fife Communities Climate Action Network, bringing together individuals, communities, local government and businesses to tackle the climate emergency and make Fife a greener and fairer place to live.

It is a developmental stage project funded by The National Lottery Community Fund's new Climate Action Fund, which enables people and communities to take the lead in tackling the climate emergency.

Climate Action Fife is piloting a range of activities to build capacity in communities, engage people from all backgrounds, tackle carbon emissions and deliver ambitious longer-term plans. Activities include:

- Climate change engagement toolkit, training and events for a range of audiences
- Behaviour change activities encouraging climate-friendly businesses, homes and gardens, food and holidays
- Feasibility studies, including a community renewable energy project, community tree planting strategy and community cycling manifesto
- Testing different approaches to getting more community groups across Fife involved in climate action
- Sharing learning and movement building

The project started 1 October 2020 and will run until 31 March 2022.

This partnership is part of [Climate Fife](#), Fife's climate emergency plan.

Return on investment from climate action

Councils undertaking climate action can achieve more than just environmental benefits; there can be wider economic and social value for residents too. For example, improving home insulation can improve health outcomes by making houses warmer, saving people money on their energy bills, invigorating new local industries, and nurturing education opportunities and skills. Councils are starting to consider how to access multiple sources of funding that can support the delivery of these broader benefits, as well as green investments.

Our Future Energy Scenarios show that the adoption of thermal efficiency measures in homes (particularly from the early 2020s to mid-2030s) and supportive government policy to encourage extensive retrofitting, is key to achieving net zero emissions by 2050 in the residential sector.

In our roundtable discussions, local authority participants expressed concern that emerging industries to retrofit buildings with insulation will not grow quickly enough to support changes in consumer behaviour and climate action.

But the local authority representatives we heard from explained that they were not content to simply sit back and wait for emerging industries: they believe their own purchasing decisions can help kick-start these emerging sectors, creating useful signals to the market – as well as jobs and even whole new industries in their local areas.

“On retrofit, the Government can lead the way on funding, but I do think there’s a big role for councils locally. So, if we’ve got housing stock, we can retrofit that, and that helps create the industry. The only way I can get [the] local college to put on the courses that are required is to retrofit all of our housing stock over a 10-year period and make sure there will be a consistent flow of demand. That will mean there are companies there that can carry it out, and then the colleges will put the apprenticeships in place.”

Leader, unitary authority in South West England

“I think for us as local authorities it’s about developing some of the alternatives, when it comes to transport. So, one of the things we’ve done, over the last few years, is put into our car parks electric charging points. We can help develop the marketplace for that.”

Leader, district council in the East Midlands

We note that, although it was not raised in our roundtables, changes to government policy around skills and training mean that local authorities will soon also gain additional powers to direct colleges in their area to provide courses on subjects that will aid the creation of new industries (including green jobs such as heat pump fitting, forestry skills, or advanced nuclear qualifications).

Regional collaboration

Local authorities can increase their impact by working collaboratively with other councils to drive regional-level action. Awareness of this opportunity is implicit in various recent national policy shifts and was also mentioned by participants in all of our roundtables.

Numerous previous studies have shown that consumers lack understanding of local authority structures and can become frustrated by cross-boundary differences where these are not well-managed. Working with neighbouring councils can help to cut costs, achieve necessary scale for larger schemes and reduce citizen confusion – especially within larger travel-to-work areas.

By building such alliances from the ground up, councils are able to ‘right-size’ their efforts, without waiting for devolution agreements from national government. It also means that new solutions can be delivered through different routes, such as planning, for greater impact.

“We work with other councils across the [region] to develop a strategic spatial plan, including looking at green and blue infrastructure across all the councils. We also look at 15-minute neighbourhoods and how we can reduce the reliance on cars in how we plan developments. So, we can actually do things that make a real difference that don’t cost masses of money, because they’re planning in from the get-go.”

Cabinet member, District council in the East Midlands

“We’re one of ten authorities working together as a centralised joint committee, so we can have a regional policy around planning and development which will influence climate change. We also have devolved government which makes it easier to get localised planning policies... If we’re smart about it, we can set agendas that are very much customised to our local areas but meeting national targets.”

Cabinet member for planning, county borough council in Wales



A powerful link to meet the needs of local communities

In both our public opinion research and the roundtable discussions, we heard that councils play a significant linking role between central Government and local communities.

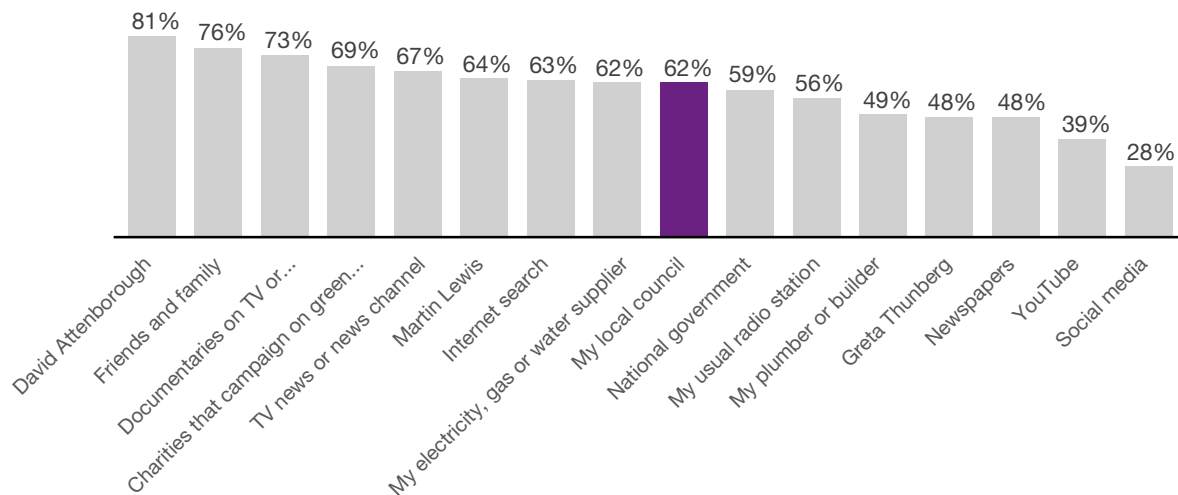
“They [local councils] could have a role getting the information from central Government and feeding it out to different communities – different ways and different methods that suits their different communities. It might have a bit more impact if it was personalised than if it was coming from Westminster.”

Consumer focus group participant

Councils are well-placed to take on this responsibility due to their combination of trust and local expertise. Our consumer polling showed that the public trust them more than many media outlets when it comes to receiving information about changing their behaviour to help the environment.

Chart 3: Trust in different sources of information

If you were looking for advice on how to make changes to your life to become ‘greener’, to what extent would you trust or not trust the different sources of information below?



In our Future Energy Scenarios, two of our decarbonisation pathways - *Leading the Way* and *Consumer Transformation* – require high levels of societal change. In these scenarios, we see higher uptake of decentralised generation as local communities have greater appetite for renewable generation. While FES takes a GB-wide view of the future of energy until 2050, it is vital to remember that drivers to encourage the necessary consumer changes cannot be one-size-fits-all, and everyone must be well informed and engaged.

We heard that councils can act as repositories of expertise – on both the communities that they serve and the transition to net zero. This powerful combination gives them the tools to navigate

the significant changes in society required to meet the net zero 2050 target and adapt it to their local area.

“We’ve got a tsunami of changes through the UK Government and the Scottish Government policy we need to respond to; about energy, decarbonisation, transport, climate justice, allocation of budgets... It feels like our role is digesting those changes, making sense of it and then working across all different Council and partner areas – talking to teams in Housing, Assets, Planning, Transport, Communities and Finance – trying to field and connect all this information. It’s a positive feeling having all this coming, but also a concern about being overtaken by it.”

Climate change officer, unitary authority in Scotland

Case study 3: Making sense of change

Local authorities are using their expertise to enable others to build the knowledge and confidence to take effective action to combat climate change.

Bath and North East Somerset Council launched a toolkit for actions that parish councils and communities can take to reduce emissions and energy consumption.

The toolkit, [here](#), signposts resources for parish councils that wish to develop opportunities for generating energy from renewable sources, such as wind and solar. It has also enabled village halls to be properly insulated and become more energy efficient.

The kit includes advice on a range of carbon-reducing measures for areas directly controlled by parish councils (such as parks, public buildings and facilities, and infrastructure such as street lighting). Parish councils are shown how they can promote individual actions such as minimising waste and switching to walking, cycling and sustainable transport. Individual parish councils are free to determine which initiatives could be explored, depending on their resources and capacity. The toolkit’s launch was covered in the [local press](#) and [online](#).

Resources (beyond the toolkit) also include a volunteering [database](#) for residents to add or search for opportunities linked to responding to the climate crisis.

The resource forms part of Bath and North East Somerset’s aim to be carbon neutral by 2030.

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Being early adopters of technology

In a whole host of areas, local authorities are pioneering new technologies in the pursuit of positive climate action. But there is an appreciation that there are different benefits depending on whether you are an early or later adopter of these actions.

For example, our 'Leading the Way' Future Energy Scenario – the fastest credible decarbonisation pathway that we explore – sees greater consumer behaviour and system changes. In this scenario, rapid early take-up of demand side response across residential, industrial and commercial consumers and Vehicle to Grid (V2G) sees a reduction in peak electricity demand of 20 GW by 2030 and 55 GW by 2040. It shows that early action in this space could have positive impacts for the energy grid in the future. Many local authorities spoke about opportunities for electrifying their vehicle fleets and testing the possibilities of V2G technology during our roundtables.

“We want to move to having electric refuse vehicles but they’re incredibly expensive. It’s the same with any new technology, it’s far more expensive in the beginning compared to what it comes down to in five years’ time.”

Cabinet member for environment, district council in Wales

As well as challenges around funding, it also places additional requirements in terms of ensuring the council has the right knowledge and expertise to harness new technologies most effectively for their local situations.

“If you want to replace your fleet, that is massively expensive. They’ve also got to be suitable vehicles, for example in hilly areas they have to be able to cope with the terrain, and that’s not always easy. So, it’s a big cost for councils who want to try and do the right thing in environmental terms.”

Cabinet member, district council in the East Midlands

Others are supporting emerging the retrofit industry (see: [Opportunities: Return on investment from climate action](#)), or experimenting with new emissions tracking programs. But there is recognition that there can be different implications depending on when you choose to adopt a technology – on the one hand it can stimulate new industries, support future cost reductions and deliver long term benefits, but it can also have cost implications in the shorter term.

However, councils can play a vital role in helping consumers overcome barriers to adopting new technology that will make the biggest impact on carbon emissions. Some of the greatest strides towards achieving net zero by 2050 will be in transport, such as by the public moving from petrol and diesel cars to electric vehicles (EV). In our previous publication, [Empowering climate action – inspiring and supporting consumer participation in the energy transition](#), we asked the public when they would switch to an EV.

Table 1: Consumer barriers to adopting electric vehicles

You said that your household owns at least one petrol/diesel car. When do you expect your household to switch from a petrol/diesel car to an electric vehicle, if at all? Select all that apply

Once electric cars are the same price as petrol and diesel	30%
Once there are more car chargers available	30%
Once electric cars are cheaper than petrol/diesel	27%
Once charging an electric car is faster	21%
Once there are more electric vehicles available on the second-hand market	21%
Once I/we have the option to charge outside our home	20%
As close to the 2030 deadline as possible	19%
Don't know	15%
I/we will continue buying second-hand petrol/diesel cars after the 2030 ban on new sales	11%
Other (Please Specify)	4%

The availability of car charging points came out as a top concern preventing people from switching sooner. We heard that councils can play a key role by installing more charging points in their areas and, through the planning system and within new developments. This demonstrates how councils can play a key role in supporting and empowering consumer behaviour change through their role in infrastructure provision.



Choosing what's effective over what's popular

Through our consumer polling, we found that the public believe local authorities are most responsible for improving recycling rates, whilst playing a supporting role to national government and individuals in improving insulation in homes and protecting the natural environment.

Table 2: Consumer opinions on roles and responsibilities to deliver climate and environmental action

Who do you think should be most responsible for achieving these?

	Individuals	Local community	Businesses	Local government	National government	None of them	Don't know
Increasing recycling rates	18%	10%	8%	33%	19%	3%	9%
Using less single-use plastic	29%	5%	36%	5%	16%	2%	8%
Reducing packaging	8%	4%	59%	5%	15%	2%	7%
Increasing energy efficiency	15%	4%	26%	8%	32%	2%	12%
Improving insulation in homes	28%	7%	7%	19%	27%	2%	10%
Replacing fossil fuel heating (such as gas boilers) with lower-carbon alternatives	12%	4%	14%	10%	44%	4%	12%
Encouraging more people to switch from petrol/diesel cars to electric cars	11%	4%	7%	8%	53%	5%	11%
Making businesses and industries greener	5%	4%	42%	6%	33%	2%	8%
Protecting and/or enhancing the natural environment	13%	13%	6%	16%	40%	2%	10%
Changing diets	61%	5%	4%	4%	10%	6%	9%
Making energy more green	6%	4%	27%	8%	43%	3%	10%

But on many issues, it is clear that the public is unaware of the potential for local authority contributions. For example, only 5% of the public think that local authorities have responsibilities for reducing packaging or single-use plastic – despite the centrality of councils in procuring and managing waste contracts that can be extremely influential on packaging decisions.

There is a similarly small acknowledgement by the public of the role that local councils can play in influencing the local energy mix. In our roundtable discussions, local authority representatives talked about the difficulty of balancing taking the most effective action on reducing emissions that also meet the expectations and understanding of the public; with the public favouring more visible outcomes such as solar panels.

Chart 4: Public understanding of local council climate plans

I understand my council's plans to tackle climate change



“There’s a disconnect between consumer expectations of local authorities and what we would deem to be best value for money. I think that’s about what consumers understand about emissions. I think if you were to ask people to draw what net zero looked like, it would be solar panels on every roof, it would be electric fleets. Maybe we will do those things but not in the next five years. It’s boring things like insulation, that don’t really make voters come out. So, there’s an education piece that’s missing.”

Local authority roundtable participant

This disconnect presents a challenge for all entities that need to play a role in net zero (whether local authority or other organisations such as utility companies). Not all changes required to meet net zero will be visible or easily understandable to the public, but we also know from our consumer research that communicating action on climate change by companies and tiers of government is incredibly important for motivating individual action. Reconciling these two push factors is not easy.

Being held back by national policy

In our Future Energy Scenarios, we recognise that clear roles are needed between government, regulator and industry to facilitate efficient transitions and market changes whilst maximising value to end consumers.

Our roundtables highlighted an inherent tension in current local authority efforts to transition to net zero: between an urge to move faster and the difficulty of digesting rapid policy change. Many representatives we spoke to were frustrated by the slow pace of change in national government policy setting and the limitations this created at the local level. The most frequently cited example was that of planning policy and the inability of local authorities to set higher standards for homes built in their area.

“When I talk to our planning team, there’s a desire to go far and fast in terms of embedding climate change policies in the planning process. But because of the restrictions placed on us by statute, and because of the competing needs – especially affordability – we can’t go any faster. We’re going through a Local Plan review now and we can’t go any further than saying, ‘do the Future Homes Standard come 2025’. We want to bring that forward into our next Local Plan but we can’t get away with that with the statutes that are in place and for having accessible and affordable projects.”

Climate change officer, borough council in the North of England

At the same time, we heard repeatedly that local government felt challenged by a lack of long-term certainty and frequent updates to policy. Processing these changes, interpreting them into local procedure and retaining consistency was hard and increased the stresses on stretched council teams.

“We need policy from central Government to be coherent and consistent. I suspect what will come next will be coherent but whether they are consistent or not would be my concern – the short-term nature of the Green Deal highlights that.”

Leader, unitary authority in South West England

Balancing these two factors is hard but worth pursuing as there is clearly appetite among local authorities to make radical change in their own areas, which can in turn test new ideas and inspire action elsewhere.

“Nationally we need to get our house in order. It’s almost impossible for us to operate in this policy vacuum that we’re in at the moment. It makes it difficult from the practical and technical aspects of Local Plans. We’re trying to push some

really climate-focused policies, we've put that in front of the Planning Inspectorate and they've told us we're going too far beyond the national picture, that we need to row back. It's really disappointing."

Policy lead, district council in the East of England

"We're reviewing our Local Plan, in order to be doing more in terms of responding to the climate emergency, but we are expecting to be knocked back. We are going to do it anyway, to demonstrate to our community that we are trying to get the right planning framework in place locally."

Local authority roundtable participant



Climate ambitions curtailed without funding

As expected, the issue of funding was cited by local authority representatives as central to being able to deliver climate action. Without significant, long-term investment, their role in delivering change will be severely curtailed.

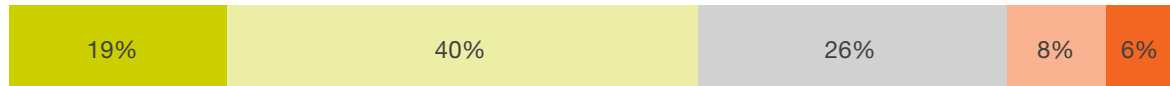
Chart 5: Public opinion on local council climate priorities

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

I want my council to concentrate on other issues ahead of climate change



I expect part of my council tax bill to go towards tackling climate change



■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

This is reinforced by our public opinion research which showed that 40% of the public want their council to focus on other issues ahead of climate change (even though 59% of the public expect part of their council tax bill to go towards tackling climate change).

“I don’t think councils should be doing a lot [on climate change]. Our lampposts were recently changed to have panels – that’s good. But the roads are awful, the potholes and that. They’ve got other things to do.”

Consumer focus group participant

“I don’t think the council talk about climate change enough. They could raise awareness more.”

Consumer focus group participant

Making the case to their communities of diverting existing funds away from urgent issues in favour of longer-term environmental aims is extremely challenging, underlining the need for additional funding from central Government.

“We have statutory needs, social services, health and wellbeing, and children’s social services – where sometimes it can be £200,000 per child. And they go up by millions every year. So what do you do when you’re trying to find money

for solar panels?”

Local authority roundtable participant

“How do you go into a Cabinet meeting where we’ve got a care home about to close, but we’re about to spend half a million on electric vehicles? There’s always a push-pull going on.”

Cabinet member for environment, district council in Wales



Understanding changing consumer behaviour

Councils can play a unique role in supporting consumer participation in the energy transition. But a barrier to doing so lies in understanding who among the public is most willing to make changes in their lives, and those who face the biggest challenges – for example in terms of cost or knowledge.

Through dialogue with communities, councils can begin to identify those willing to move faster as well as those who cannot. Then, by combining this information with their expertise, they can tailor different approaches to engaging the public climate action.

This is an opportunity but also a challenge because although most local authorities have well established communications functions, many lack expertise in behaviour change – an area that will become increasingly important to achieve the UK’s ambition for net zero by 2050.

Case study 4: Increasing levels of participation in the energy transition

Local authorities are using public consultation to shape their climate action policies and ensure the greatest levels of participation possible.

Harborough District Council used a variety of consultation methods to consult residents on its draft Climate Emergency Action Plan, including workshops with climate-focused voluntary groups and online surveys open to all residents.

As well as leading by example (Harborough has reduced its emissions by over 40% since 2008) the Council has ensured its plan enables participation in climate action among those willing to do so as well as those facing particular barriers.

New public electric vehicle charging points have been installed, information provided for communities who wish to pursue lower carbon choices, and support given to residents who initiated a Plastic Reduction Pledge. In addition, over 500 homes have received ECO-grants to improve domestic energy efficiency. The Council has also worked with partners in Public Health to ensure vulnerable residents can access help with fuel bills and energy advice.

Harborough aims to publish an adopted plan in the autumn of 2021.

More information can be found on Harborough District Council’s [website](#).

Inspiring consumer transformation



Inspiring consumer transformation

Our research into public attitudes and behaviours in the energy transition provides a useful toolkit for local authorities to engage the public as they work to make the most of the opportunities we have detailed above and to surmount the challenges that they face.

Consumers can encounter a range of barriers and motivators to engaging climate action and the energy transition. These vary between different members of the public. Our [Empowering climate action](#) research identified six archetypes or 'segments' that exist in the British population – each requiring a slightly different approach to enable and empower actions that can support the UK's climate change targets, including the adoption of green home technologies and services.

In brief the six segments of the British population are:



Climate Worriers – 18% of GB. Climate Worriers are the oldest of the segments and they worry about a lot of things – including climate change. Although likely to be affluent, cost and disruption are still barriers to action. They feel that their actions can make a difference but are overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge. They want to be convinced that it is not all too late already and told in specific detail what they should do to help mitigate the impact of climate change.



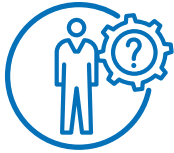
Price Sensitive – 19% of GB. This group are highly informed and engaged with the climate change agenda and keen to make practical change, but they are also highly sensitive to cost. They are focused more on waste and consuming less than on climate directly. They think that the UK should do what it can to tackle climate change, even if other countries did not.



Actively Engaged – 19% of GB. The Actively Engaged are highly engaged and aware of current affairs issues generally. They care deeply about climate change and have consistently the highest scores in caring for the planet. They score highest when it comes to having already taken actions like turning down their heating and using their cars less. They are among the most educated of the segments and the most likely to say that they feel their personal actions will have an impact in reducing climate change.



Busy Convenience-Seekers – 15% of GB. This group is less engaged in current affairs in general and that includes climate change. This does not mean that they don't care – there are issues such as the loss of distinct seasons that worry them more than other groups – but they don't have the time, money or inclination to do much about it. They are the most urban, the most likely to have children still living at home and are the youngest of our segments.



Pragmatic Sceptics – 8% of GB. This group is most negative about climate change but make up the smallest segment of the population. They generally do not prioritise climate change as a concern – only 2% selected it as an important issue facing the country in our poll. However, in focus groups they show far more awareness and concern than this result might suggest. Their attitude is that there is little point in doing anything when businesses and governments are not. Their educational attainment levels are the lowest, and they are among the older of the segments. They trust no one other than maybe their friends and family.



Disengaged Cynics – 20% of GB. Disengaged Cynics are generally less informed than the other groups. This group can be expected to disperse into the other segments as net zero and climate change debates become more mainstream and they become more engaged. They have the lowest levels of home ownership and are the most likely to fall into the DE socio-economic group. They have more than the average number of children living at home and are among the least likely to be retired.

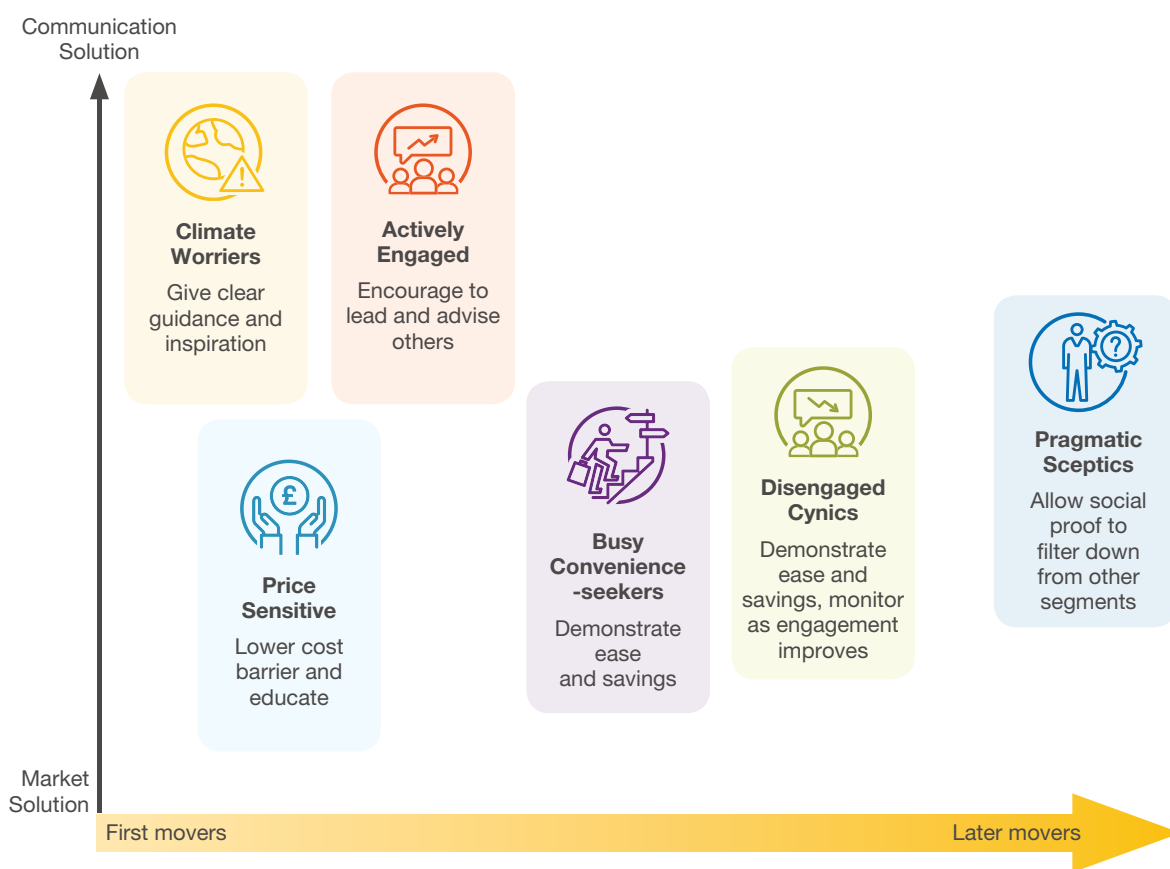


Conclusion



Conclusion: The role of local authorities in empowering climate action

How and when the public is engaged on climate change and the energy transition matters. To help practitioners visualise a way of engaging with the segments we have produced an 'Engagement Roadmap'. In the roadmap we place each segment along a prioritisation spectrum showing the order in which each might participate. There is also an intervention spectrum that shows whether each group requires a predominantly communication or market-based solution to encourage participation. Further information about this Engagement Roadmap can be found in our [Empowering climate action](#) report.



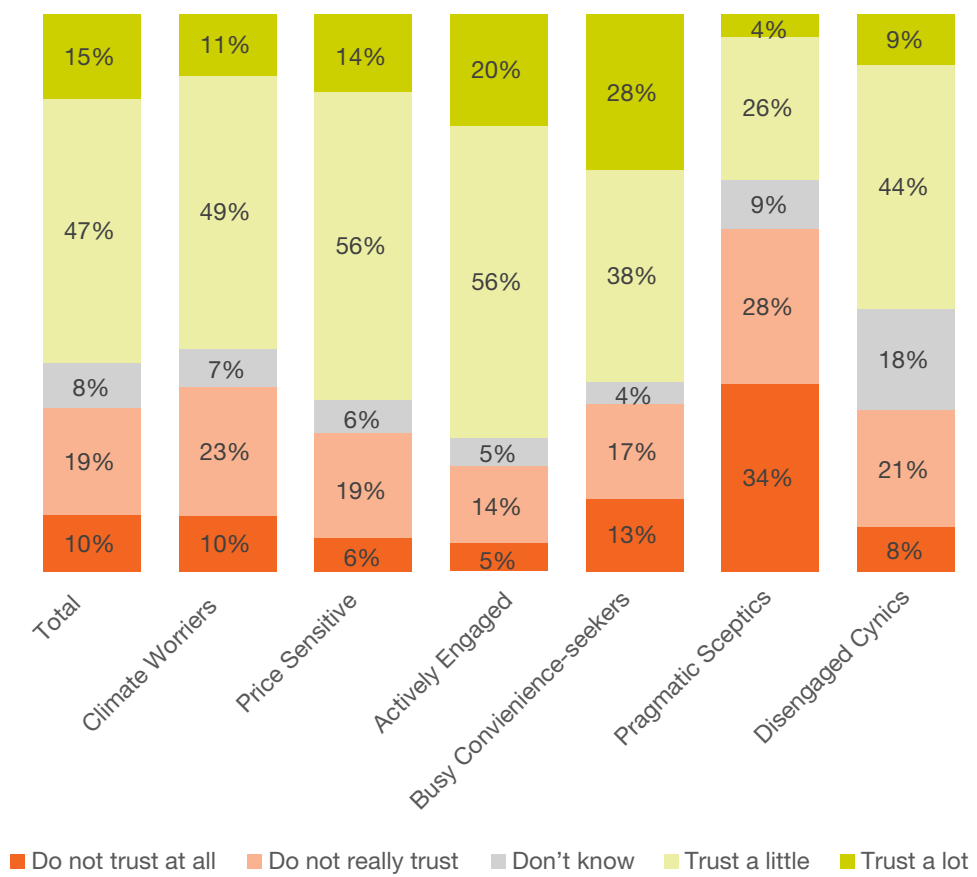
In essence, three segments (the Climate Worriers, Price Sensitive and Actively Engaged) become the priority audiences. This represents 56% of the population, and communicating with them requires three distinct strategies:

- Giving clear guidance and inspiration,
- Lowering costs, and
- Encouraging leadership.

As this new research into the unique role of local authorities shows, councils have a key role to play in offering guidance and inspiration, and in encouraging leadership. Their visible convening role in local communities provides a route that can channel the anxiety of Climate Worriers and motivate the Actively Engaged, while helping to create the markets and supporting infrastructure that will lower costs for the Price Sensitive.

Chart 6: Public trust in councils for green advice

If you were looking for advice on how to make changes to your life to become 'greener', to what extent would you trust or not trust: my local council?



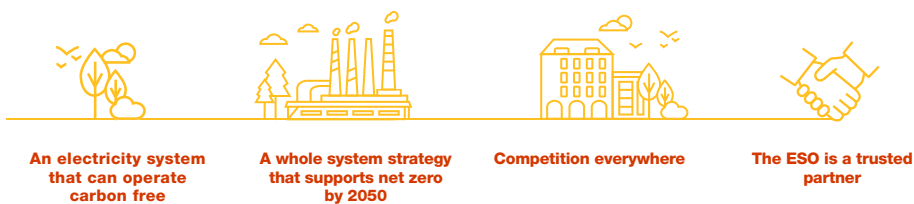
Local authorities also have an important role as a link between national policy and communities across Britain. This is demonstrated clearly by the high trust scores they achieve amongst Busy Convenience-seekers – who are otherwise less trusting of many sources of information about climate action than their peers.

There is no 'silver bullet' to supporting the public in the energy transition, but it is clear that local authorities already play a role in enabling and inspiring the public to take action, and that by navigating the challenges they face, their expertise and local knowledge can be better utilised to support climate action and the energy transition.

About the Electricity System Operator (ESO)

Electricity is a modern-day necessity and the ESO exists to make sure everyone gets access to a safe, reliable and affordable supply. We make sure people, communities and businesses across Great Britain have the electricity they need at the flick of a switch because without it, society and the economy wouldn't function. We bring energy to life. But providing reliable and affordable electricity is not enough. The energy we all consume needs to get cleaner, quickly. We are passionate about making a difference and delivering that change. We are here to help Great Britain and other countries reduce their carbon emissions so that our planet is safe for future generations to enjoy. Our mission is to enable the transformation to a sustainable energy system and ensure the delivery of reliable, affordable energy for all consumers.

By 2025, we aim to have:



This means we need to fundamentally change how our system is designed to operate. We are working with the industry to integrate newer technologies across the system and increase demand-side participation.

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