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Stick or twist?

Why the UK's net-zero strategy is faltering and may need to change

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Highlights

1. The UK has long been seen as a global leader on climate action. Thanks to strong public and political support, the carbon emissions generated within the UK are now less than half what they were in 1990.

2. However, cross-party political support has weakened in recent years, reflecting a noticeable shift in the general public's feelings toward net-zero.

3. We don't yet fully understand what's driving this change but we suggest that one important reason may be that the current approach to net-zero hasn't done enough to benefit or empower many communities.

4. At the same time, most of the remaining emissions are bound up with every day, people-centred activities — like transport, food, and domestic heating — meaning the next stage of decarbonisation will likely feel much more disruptive to the general public's day-to-day life.

5. Ultimately, the way we currently govern net-zero has taken us a long way, but this approach may not prove as effective in removing the remaining half of the UK's emissions.

6. Our research helps chart an alternative path forward towards net-zero. The JUST-Systems project will explore new, more locally-driven forms of governance that could better support communities and speed up decarbonisation in these everyday sectors.

1. A fractured cross-party consensus on climate action

On 26th November 2008 the UK achieved something quite special. In fact, it was a world-first. It became the first country in the world to establish a long-term legally binding framework to cut carbon emissions; the Climate Change Act (CCC 2026). It set out the long-game for decarbonisation, charting the direction of the UK's low-carbon journey, laying out five-yearly carbon budgets for the UK to realise an 80% reduction on carbon emissions by 2050 versus 1990. It also levied responsibility on government for meeting these targets, overseen by the Climate Change Committee that would advise on - and scrutinise - the government's progress towards these.

The passing of the Act was a rare example of cross-party consensus, which saw just five MPs vote against the bill during its second reading (Public Whip 2028). Prior to this, Cameron's Conservatives had thrown their support behind the Climate Change Bill, recasting themselves as 'green'; immortalised by his "hug a husky" trip to the Arctic in 2006. By lending their support as the Government's Opposition, the Conservatives "can also claim significant credit for the Climate Change Act" (Carbon Brief 2025). With the credit crunch sending the markets into meltdown, it was UK Parliament's resolve to reduce carbon emissions and build a green economy that offered a rare oasis of certainty, amidst a backdrop of financial turmoil.

Fast forward 17 years, and a very different picture is emerging. On the one hand, the Climate Change Act has been an incredible success, with the UK halving its territorial carbon emissions versus 1990, primarily through decarbonising its electricity supply (CCC 2025a). On the other hand however, over the past year, the cross-party consensus on climate action has fractured.

Whilst it's challenging to determine the tipping point, the 2nd October 2025 is probably a good place to start. The date is significant because the leader of the opposition Kemi Badenoch announced that the Conservatives would repeal the UK's 2008

Climate Change Act, if they were to form the next government. This was a dramatic reversal of the stance held by previous Conservative Party leaders, such as David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson, for whom net-zero was a central plinth of their policy agenda.

The Conservatives' new-found hostility towards net-zero represents a brazen attempt to match Reform UK's earlier commitment to "scrap net-zero" in its 2024 manifesto, with both parties now competing for a similar demographic. With Reform and the Conservatives currently (Feb 2026) set to receive 44% of the vote at the next general election (YouGov 2026a), the future of net-zero looks very bleak indeed.

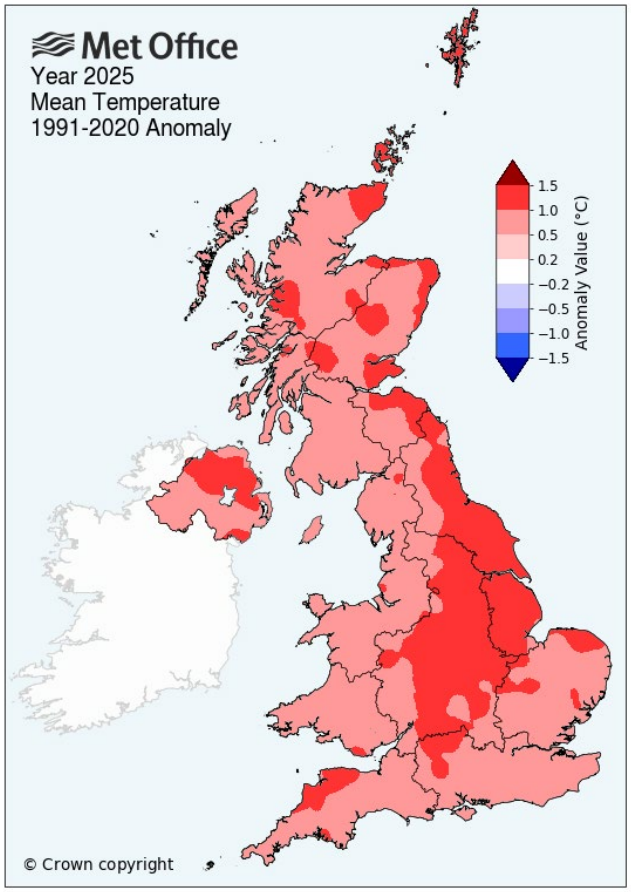

Figure 1: UK's 2025 mean temperature 1991-2020 anomaly (Source: Met Office 2026a)

In the 17 years since the Climate Change Act was passed, there has never before been such a coordinated political opposition to climate action in the UK. Ironically, this comes at the same time the effects of climate change are felt more keenly than ever, with 2025 being the warmest year on record for the UK (Met Office 2026a) (Figure 1). Alongside record-breaking heat, the UK is also witnessing a dramatic increase in the frequency and intensity of rainfall across the UK too. For example, 2011-2020 was 9% wetter than 1961-1990 (Met Office 2026b).

The UK is already paying the cost of climate change. Research from Green Alliance (Dunn 2025) finds that the impacts of climate change and nature loss are already "directly increasing annual household costs by £233 across England through higher insurance premiums, water bills and food prices". Without an unprecedented international climate mitigation (p.5) and adaptation effort, these costs will continue to rise. Under current policies, the total cost of climate change damages to the UK are projected to triple, from 1.1% of GDP at present to 3.3% by 2050 (Rising et al. 2022).

At exactly the same moment the UK needs to decarbonise its complex and harder-to-treat demand-side sectors (e.g. transport, food, housing), calls to slow or even halt our net-zero transition are gathering momentum.

So why the change of heart on climate action, and why now?

2. Declining public support for net zero

This growing political opposition to net-zero is at odds with what most UK voters actually think about climate change. According to polls, almost four out of five of the UK population are concerned about climate change, whilst 58% expect net-zero to have a positive impact on the economy long-term, versus 22% who thought it would be negative (DESNZ 2025a).

These absolute numbers obscure a subtle, yet important, long-term shift in public support for climate action that chimes with the Conservatives shifting stance. In Autumn 2021, 13.8% of the UK public surveyed were unconcerned about climate change versus 85% who were concerned (DESNZ 2025a). By summer 2025, this had shifted to 19.4% versus 79%; a 5.6% swing (ibid) (Figure 2). If extrapolated across the entire UK adult population, this represents an additional 3.2 million people aged 15 years and above[1], who are unconcerned about climate change; equivalent to the entire population of Wales[2] (ONS 2025).

We also find that the environment has slipped down the UK public's list of priorities, as other issues have risen up the agenda. For example, in October 2021, the environment was cited by 34% of the public as one of the three most important issues facing the UK (YouGov 2026b) By August 2025, this had fallen to 16% (ibid).

Despite the consistent majority support for climate action, there are indications the tide of public opinion may be turning. A failure to acknowledge and respond to these signs could be catastrophic to the UK's climate change goals, especially as we enter a new phase of climate action that will demand greater involvement – and change – from the public.

This is because the focus on net-zero is now broadening beyond the decarbonisation of energy supply, to include the electrification and reduction of our energy demand. This means the general public will need to 'buy in' to this transition, because the decarbonisation of demand-side activities, like how we heat our homes, how we travel, will demand different behaviours, consumption patterns etc. and consumer choices. For example, the Climate Change Committee (CCC) estimate that over a third (37%) of emissions reduction in 2040, versus the counterfactual baseline, will be contingent on households making low-carbon choices (CCC 2025b).

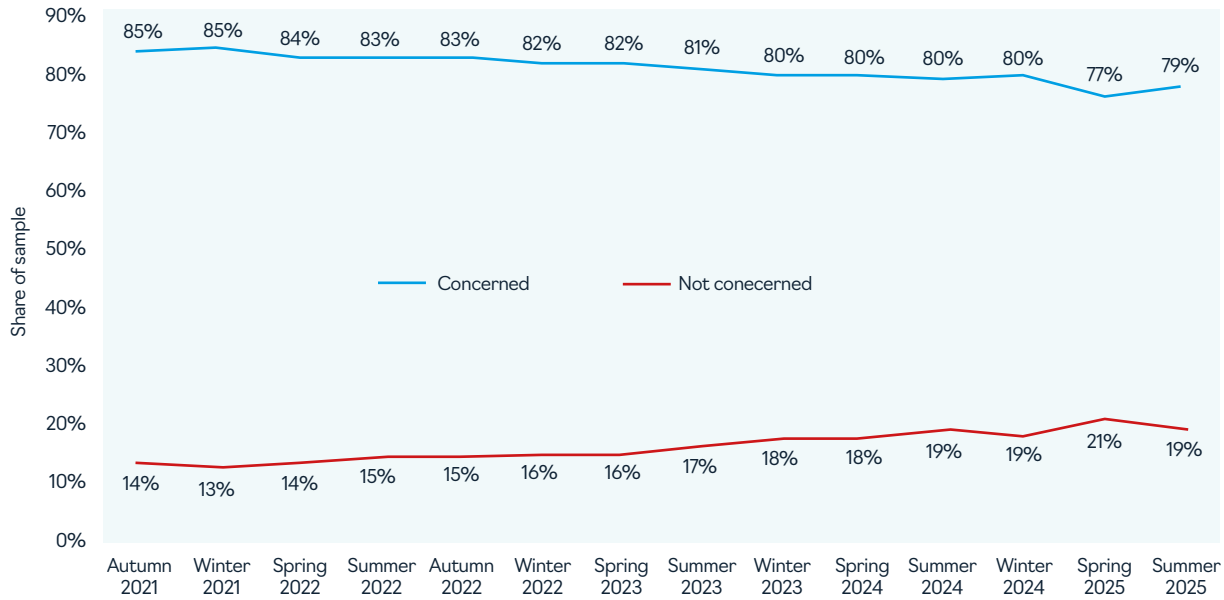

Figure 2: UK public concern about climate change (Source: DESNZ 2025a)

[1] Due to limitations of the ONS data, we cannot easily segment the population from 18 years old upwards. Consequently, we take a total population of 57,523,572, which includes ages 15 years and upwards (ONS 2025).

[2] The total population of Wales in mid-2024 was estimated at 3,186,581, 2025a. (ONS 2025)

This represents a very different challenge to decarbonising supply-side activities, such as electricity supply, which has tended to bypass citizens and consumers. As outlined by Climate Citizens (2024):

"Much of the carbon reduction to date in the UK has come from the power sector and industry, meaning that government has not been obliged to work with people directly, to make the case for policies, and design policies that work for people's lives." (p.3)

As our journey towards net-zero increasingly collides with people's everyday lives, the argument for climate action will need to be won not just around the Cabinet table in Downing Street, or the boardroom tables of company headquarters, but around people's kitchen tables.

To better understand how we can deliver net-zero in a way that resonates with people, we must first consider what might be eroding the public's support for climate action. We discuss two potential causes:

1. The benefits of climate action are not being felt by the majority of people
2. Climate action is being done to people, and not with people

3. The benefits of climate action are not being felt by the majority of people

A recent survey from Climate Outreach (2025) found that the top reason cited by those unconcerned by climate change was having more immediate concerns to worry about (34%). This was significantly higher than other factors, such as a belief that humans can adapt to climate change (22%) or the threat of climate change being exaggerated (14%). Most tellingly, "only 4% said they don't think climate change is real" (Climate Outreach 2025).

This speaks to how climate change is competing for attention with other day-to-day challenges, not least the escalating cost of living, largely at the hands of extremely high energy prices[3] and associated inflation. For example, between 2022 and 2025, approximately 7 million low-income households (~60%) went without essentials (JRF 2025), such as food, clothes, washing etc). For these households the threat of climate change is considered a secondary concern to the day-to-day challenge of making ends-meet and surviving, even if in reality climate breakdown is contributing to these rising costs (Green Alliance 2025).

Going further still, Climate Outreach (2025) found that those people who are struggling the most to afford the cost of living care just as much about climate change as those who are better off. The key difference being that they are also the people most sceptical about the wider benefits of net-zero for the UK.

The unaffordable cost of everyday living for so many households, sits alongside a similarly palpable sense of living in a 'Broken Britain'. In their book 'When Nothing Works', Calafati et al. (2023) note the failure of the 'palpable economy', which refers to the tangible, everyday aspects of life that people can directly see and feel, such as the poor state of infrastructure, public services and the decline of the high street.

Following their 2024 General Election victory, Labour's Plan for Change (UK Gov 2024a) sought to connect the dual issues of climate action and public renewal. It presented an alternative narrative, whereby voters were presented with a plan for government that framed climate action as a means of tackling the challenges of the cost of living, economic stagnation and the decline of public services, as well as climate change. For example, its Warm Homes Plan (2026) notes "health" 34 times and explains that "living in a cold home significantly affects mental and physical health" (p.17). Turning to energy security and the cost of living, it explains the necessity of "investing in energy efficiency, clean

[3] It's important to note that the UK's high energy prices have partly been a function of its reliance on natural gas and its influence on setting the price of electricity. As explained by Orso et al. (2024) of NESTA: "One reason that electricity prices are high in the UK is that gas sets the marginal price more often than in any EU nation, doing so 97% of the time in 2021".

Climate Citizens (2024), Getting to net zero: Priorities for public engagement in climate policy, Lancaster University.

heat, and smart technologies to take advantage of clean, homegrown renewable energy", and "reduce our exposure to volatile energy prices" (p.17).

Through its Clean Power 2030 (UK Gov 2024) plan, the UK Government exclaims that accelerating the decarbonisation of our grid would see the UK spearhead the global revolution in renewables and become a catalyst for low-carbon investment and job creation: "These changes will have a profound impact on people's livelihoods, as they bring with them new, higher value, future-proof jobs and employment" (p.47).

The shift in positioning is clear. Climate action is no longer the headline act but is instead sharing the stage with other immediate and tangible challenges that are facing voters, such as lower energy bills, improved health and job opportunities. There is however much riding on the success of Labour's strategy, not least the pace at which the public experience a reduction in the **cost of living** and enhanced **job opportunities** associated with a net-zero transition. However, realising these objectives in this parliament is likely to prove challenging.

Focusing on the **cost of living**, the savings enjoyed from net-zero infrastructure can only be achieved through a public downpayment on investment today (Scottish Government 2025a CCC 2025) (Figure 3). In the period leading up to these investments 'paying back' the general public, we run the risk of net-zero policies being viewed as a net-cost, rather than a net-saving. For some older members of the public, they may never directly enjoy the payback from these investments, meaning that these will be passed on to the next generation instead. The majority of the UK public already expect that net-zero will increase living costs, especially in both the short- (69%) and long-term (50%) (DESNZ 2025a). Combined with an escalating cost of living crisis and stubbornly high levels of poverty (including fuel poverty), this is generating pressure on government to reduce both emissions and bills simultaneously; not in sequence.

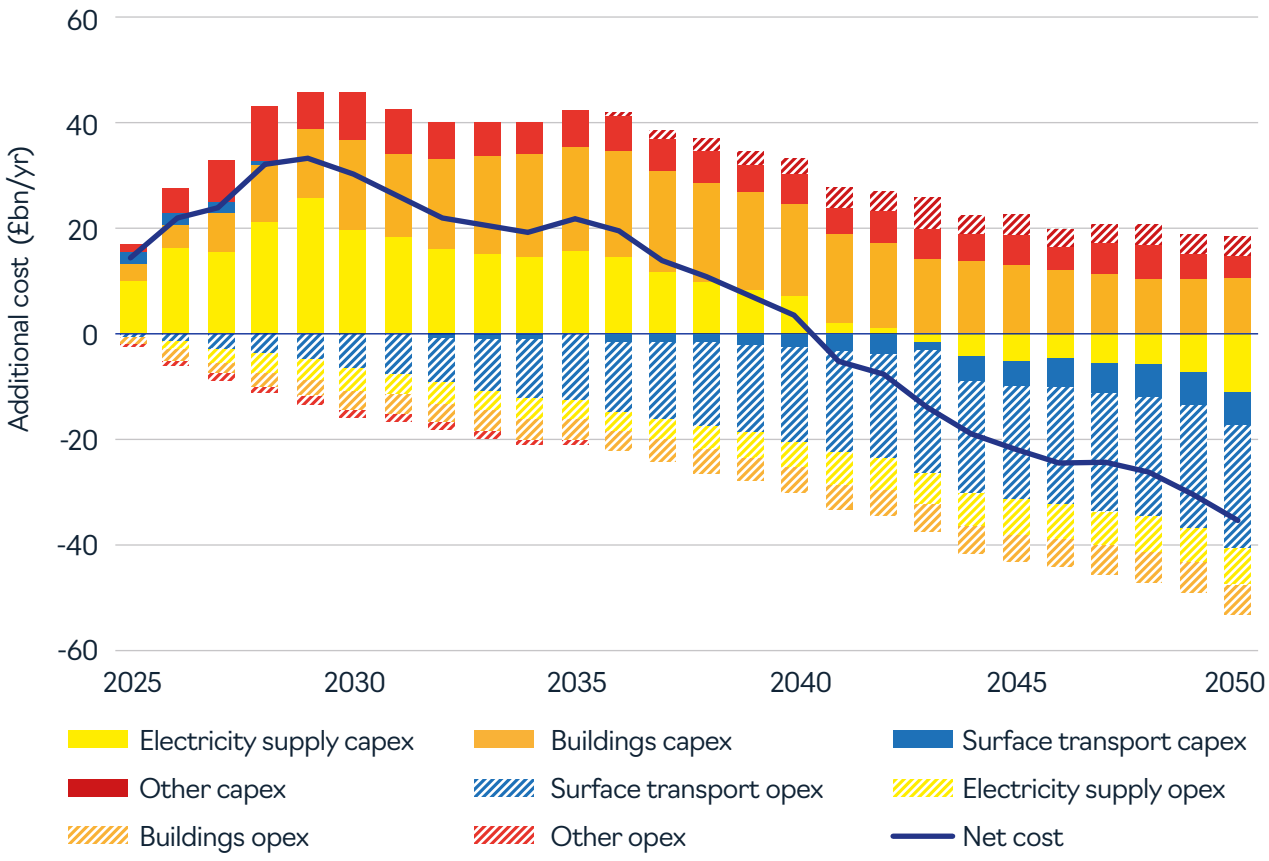

Figure 3: Additional capital expenditure and operating costs in the Balanced Pathway, compared to the baseline (Source: CCC 2025a)

Turning to **job opportunities**, it is true that the UK's low-carbon economy is growing rapidly, seeing a 10% increase in the past year, supporting almost 1 million jobs, and offering pay 15% higher than the current national average (CBI Economics and ECIU 2025). However, akin to the financial 'pay-back' of net-zero, the full extent of 'green job' opportunities will not emerge overnight. Establishing new industries takes time.

There is mounting evidence that a net-zero transition - and the 'green jobs'[4] it creates - benefits some segments of the workforce more than others. Research from the Resolution Foundation (Broom et al. 2022) finds that 'green jobs' (i.e. employment in low-carbon sectors) tend to favour higher-skilled workers, versus 'brown jobs' (i.e. employment in high-carbon sectors). This asymmetry creates an employment gap, whereby the workers who being displaced from 'brown jobs' are not necessarily able to simply migrate into 'green jobs', due to differing skill requirements (ibid).

Importantly too, new jobs are not necessarily being created in the areas where employment is being - and will be - impacted most by decarbonisation, such as in those regions most dependent on oil, gas and steel industries for employment. We find that high-emission sector jobs (i.e. brown jobs) are currently concentrated in the Midlands, Yorkshire and Humber, as well as the North East of England and Scotland (Figure 4), whilst low-emission sector jobs (i.e. green jobs) are currently concentrated in London, the South of England and the Central Belt of Scotland (ONS 2025b) (Figure 4).

The current geographical mismatch between new 'green jobs' and traditional 'brown jobs' has therefore done little – so far – to create new employment in former industrial towns. As Nicholas Beuret (2025) explains:

"Old centres of industry like Port Talbot are struggling to retain jobs, while net zero businesses tend to be far more dispersed nationally, with many in London and the south-east [of England]. As the

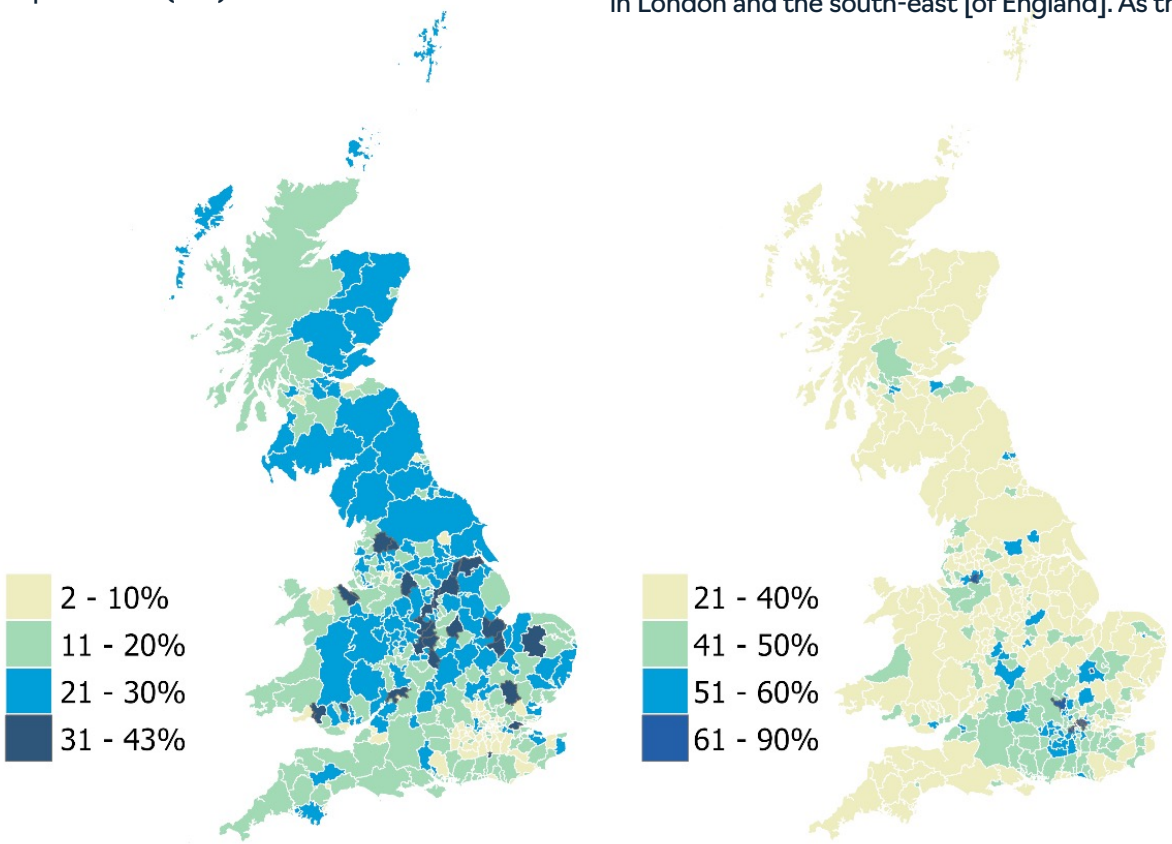

Figure 4: Percentage of employees, full-time equivalent (FTE), in the five highest-emission (left) and five lowest-emissions (right) sectors, 2023 (Source: ONS 2025b)

[4] The Office for National Statistics (ONS) defines a 'green job' as "as employment in an activity that contributes to protecting or restoring the environment, including those that mitigate or adapt to climate change" (ONS 2025c).

transition progresses, industrial towns will feel even more abandoned."

Some critics have suggested that this situation has emerged due to a lack of any coordinated interventionist strategy from government – at all levels – designed to catalyse new green industries in post-industrial regions that used to be home to thriving fossil fuel industries. Arguably, the dial has shifted in recent months with the provision of the North Sea Future Plan (UK Gov 2025a) and the Clean Energy Jobs Plan (UK Gov 2025b) with both policy positions highlighting the need to work in partnership with industry and trade unions, combined with substantive new investment in skills and training.

Set apart from the benefits of new green jobs and industries, is the provision of Community Benefit Funds (CBFs) associated with net-zero projects. These are voluntary funds that a project developer or owner(s) donate into, based on a pre-agreed package of community benefits, to be provided to one or more communities (Hannon et al. 2025). In recent years, such funds have become commonplace for renewable power projects, almost exclusively for onshore wind and hydropower projects. Our research[5] finds that approximately £40m worth of community benefits were distributed to Scottish communities in 2024 but that these were highly concentrated in a just handful of constituencies, despite the public's investment via taxation and bills that has underpinned the renewable industry. For example, each year, Shetland (the isles in the far north west) receives £97 per capita, compared to just 9 pence per capita in Angus South (central east-coast) (Figure 5). In a similar vein to 'green jobs', community benefits are a 'postcode lottery'. There are also concerns that in some cases this funding is not addressing communities' key concerns, such as in the case of Caithness (far north mainland) (Potts et al. 2024).

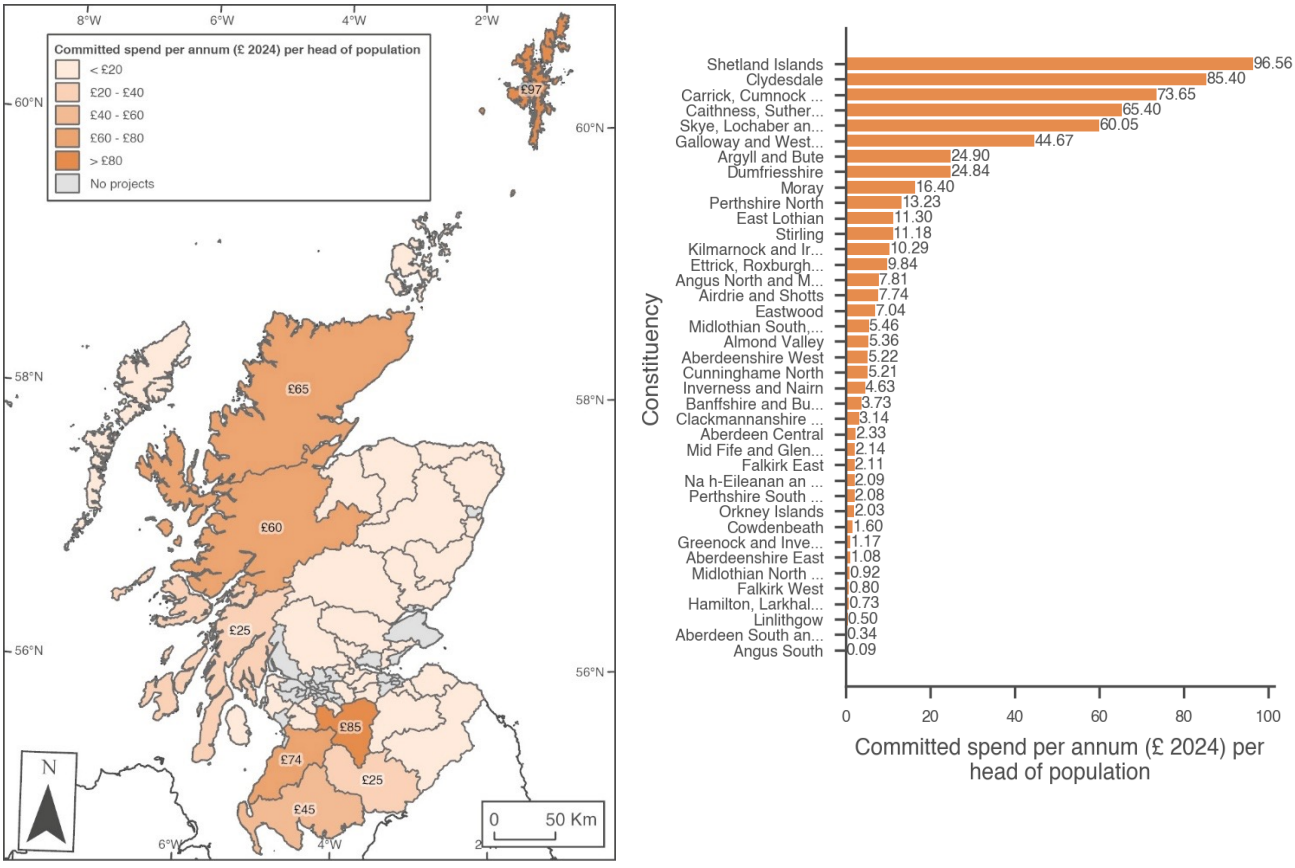

Figure 5: Total spend by constituency per annum, normalised by head of population (Source: Hannon et al. forthcoming)

[5] Publication forthcoming.

Net-zero's brand is further tarnished by wider justice concerns. One of the most significant is that the people least able to afford the cost of net-zero, may also be paying relatively more towards the transition. For example, we find how lower income households are paying relatively more towards net-zero policy costs than higher-income households, such as via their energy bills[6] (Owen et al. 2020):

> "The lifestyles of higher income households require nearly five times more energy than the lowest, but because levies are only raised on energy bills, those with high incomes pay only 1.9 times more towards policy costs." (Owen et al. 2020) (p.1193)

This sense of injustice is compounded further still by concerns that the financial returns of net-zero investment are not being fairly redistributed. For example, whilst consumers pay record energy bills, it is the UK's energy companies who are recording exceptional profits. For example, the profit margin for the UK's energy generation and network companies between 2020 and 24 were significantly above FTSE 350 average of 14% (Common Wealth 2025), with electricity distribution (64%) and transmission (57%) network companies recording the highest. The same "analysis found that £416 of the average bill of £1,719 was taken as pre-tax profits by the major electricity generators, networks and household suppliers last year" (Taylor 2025). United (2025) recently commissioned research that uncovered a similar situation, with profit margins for gas extraction (53%), the grid (38%) and generation (28%) all sitting well above the economy average of 7%.

The UK Government's decision to implement a cap on energy bills, alongside "windfall taxes" on both renewable (i.e. the Electricity Generator Levy) and fossil fuel energy companies (i.e. Energy Profits Levy), are themselves an admission that these profits could not be reasonably justified to the public, especially at a time when energy prices have been so high.

There is a growing sense that the transition to net-zero will - for large swathes of the UK public - do little to cut the cost of living, create new employment opportunities or generate community benefits in the near-term. In the meantime, millions of people in the UK continue to struggle to make ends meet and are concerned about the mounting costs of net-zero on their household finances. The UK therefore finds itself in a situation whereby the majority of citizens are not yet feeling the benefits of net-zero but are already shouldering the costs. This is exacerbated by concerns about how fairly the pains and gains of net-zero are being distributed. It is against this backdrop, where parties like Reform UK are finding fertile ground.

[6] The UK Government announced in its 2025 Budget how some policy costs would be moved away from bills, with some shifting to general taxation. The Energy Company Obligation (ECO) funding will end from 31 March 2026 and 75% of RO costs will now be funded from general taxation from 1 April 2026. It is expected that the average household will benefit from a £150 reduction in the costs on their energy bill (UK Gov 2025b).

4. Climate action is being done to people, and not with people

Having dealt with questions of whether our approach to net-zero is currently enriching the public (answer: not for the majority), we now consider whether the UK's approach to net-zero is empowering the public.

The first issue to raise is that the British public do not feel particularly empowered by our approach to governance in general and they already feel quite powerless to tackle many of the issues discussed in the previous section. A recent Ipsos survey with Kings College London found that just 12% of the British public feel they have at least some influence over decision-making in the country, as a whole (IPSOS 2025; Duffy et al. 2025).

This degree of powerlessness is palpable at the local level too. A recent Department for Culture, Media & Sport (2024) survey found that in 2023/24, just 23% of adults – roughly 1 in 4 - felt they can personally influence decisions affecting their local area. This perceived lack of agency contrasts against the 50% of adults who felt it was important to be able to influence decisions affecting their local area. This finding was echoed in the Ipsos-KCL survey too (IPSOS 2025; Duffy et al. 2025).

A similar situation has emerged regarding climate policy. Polling from Moseley et al. (2025) finds that three out of five respondents (59%) felt they had no - or very little - opportunity to influence climate policies. Yet, Edgar and Baeck's (2023) survey of over 2,000 members of the public, found that "72% of the public think it is important they are given a say in how to reduce the UK's carbon emissions and transition to net-zero".

Whether it is climate policy – or other forms of policy making - there is clearly a deficit in terms of the degree of influence the UK public wishes to wield over decision making in their local area, versus the power they actually believe they possess[7]. There are likely to be myriad reasons why the public feel this sense of powerlessness, including how wealth, and the associated power that ownership affords, are concentrated in the hands of a very small minority.

The distribution of land ownership is one such example. Half of Scotland's privately owned rural land is owned by just 408 people (0.01% of the population) and 83% is owned by private entities (Wightman 2026) (Figure 6). In England, 30% of the land is owned by aristocracy and gentry, with a further 17% owned by 'new money' (e.g. oligarchs, financiers etc.) (Shrubsole 2019). The share of land owned by communities or local councils pales in comparison:

- In Scotland, communities owned 2.7% of the total land area in 2024 (Scottish Government 2025b).
- In England, Local Authorities owned just 4% of the land in 2018 (Shrubsole 2019)[8]

Turning to business ownership, we see a similar concentration of wealth in private hands, with the majority of economic activity flowing through privately owned businesses versus more democratic forms of ownership. In 2025, total business turnover was £5.7 trillion (UK Gov 2025c), however just a small fraction (£179 billion) of this is through cooperatives and mutuals (Co-operatives 2025). This equates to just 0.2% of all businesses and approximately 1.5% of UK GDP (ibid).

The UK's high share and concentration of private wealth has created a situation where a significant share of decision making powers reside with individuals and companies, rather than with local government and/or community-led organisations. Political power is therefore concentrated in the hands of the few, rather than the many; in turn driving a positive feedback cycle that locks in economic inequality. As Joseph Stiglitz (2014) explains: "economic inequality translates into political inequality, and political inequality yields increasing economic inequality".

[7] Interestingly, "28% of adults said that they would like to be more involved in decisions made by their council that affect the local area," although "20% said no, and 53% said it depends on the issue" (Department for Culture Media & Sport 2024).

[8] The Common Wealth (2025) find that £15bn of local-authority-owned assets have been sold since 2010.

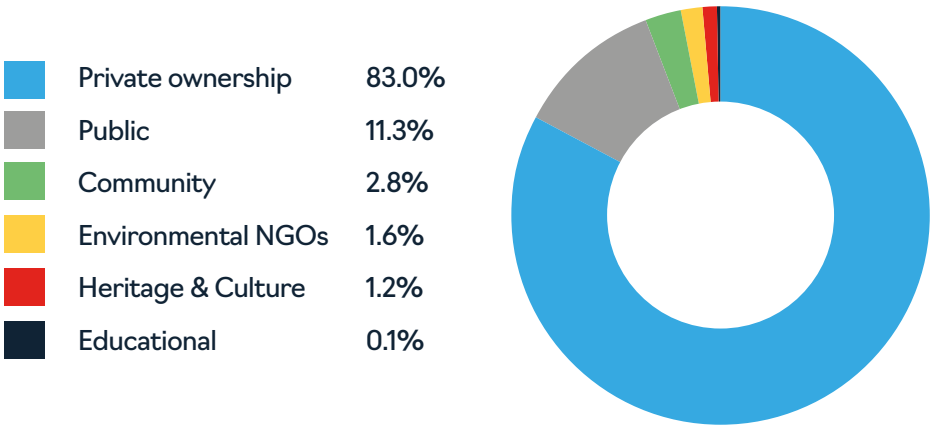

Figure 6: Scotland's rural land ownership by sector (Source: Wightman 2026)

Taking an approach to net-zero that does little to challenge this status quo, means we can assume that it will be the very same people who currently own and control the UK's land, assets and resources today, who reap the financial dividends of net-zero tomorrow. This exacerbates the situation noted earlier, whereby the benefits of climate action are not being felt by the majority of people.

Another contributing factor to the public's sense of disempowerment regarding net-zero is the UK's ineffective approach to public engagement on climate and sustainability issues. For example, Edgar and Baeck's (2023) survey identified that "only 12% thought that the government is doing a good job of involving them in making decisions on how we tackle climate change" (p.4) and "46% think the government is doing a bad job of this" (p.4). This difficult job is made even harder with the rise of climate denialism and misinformation, and particularly how "a New Denial is sweeping social media, no longer bent on denying climate science. It's new target: climate solutions and the people pushing for them" (Nicolosi et al. 2025).

The failure to successfully engage with the public on specific sustainability policy or project can mean a 'social licence to operate' is not achieved (Homsy and Hart 2021; Holley and Mitcham 2016), posing a material risk to the success of these interventions. Focusing on the case of island communities, Kallis et al. (2021) explain how engagement tended to be more constructive "where local empowerment and knowledge featured strongly in discussions" (p.8), with a focus on how the energy project would help contribute to local development and address vulnerabilities. In contrast:

> "Tensions were more pronounced where control over agendas and decisions were regarded as dominated by outside political and economic interests contrast, tensions were more pronounced where control over agendas and decisions were regarded as dominated by outside political and economic interests." (p.8)

Turning from engagement to governance, we also find a clear appetite for more place-based, democratic forms of local governance versus at present. A survey from Moseley et al. (2025) found that respondents believed Local Authorities and affected communities should have the same degree of influence over climate policy as elected MPs and independent experts. A recent study in North East Scotland (Shapovalova et al 2025) echoed the public's concerns over poor representation and a desire for more participation. It identified that despite recognising the importance of civic processes, such as climate assemblies, these processes were perceived to lack policy 'bite' and pathways for delivery.

One of the fundamental issues here is not a lack of appetite for greater local-level representation on net-zero issues but a lack of capacity and capability from local institutions to facilitate this. Drawing on their research of people working in local government, (Baeck 2023)

> "a high level of interest in involving the public, especially when it comes to enabling citizens to

> influence decision making, building trust, being more inclusive and taking action on climate change. But a lack of funding, and bureaucracy, were consistently ranked as the biggest issues holding back more public participation in local government" (Baeck 2023)

The same report (ibid) flags how the public's dissatisfaction with their degree of participation in climate policy is representative of a broader view that "the UK's model of democracy and government does not put citizens and their interests at the heart of decision making" (IfG 2023). Instead this model privileges the views of some parties over others. In short, "people feel disempowered – and to a large extent they are" (ibid).

Expanding upon this, the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) (2022) drew various conclusions, including how "the governance arrangements for England (and the United Kingdom as a whole) are some of the most centralised among democratic countries in the world" (p.3), yet there remained a lack of clarity on where decisions are made and where accountability lies.

Regardless of the reasons for the British public's sense of disempowerment, the problem is clear. Achieving net-zero will demand fundamental changes to our economy and society. However, the majority of Britons do not feel empowered by the UK's incumbent governance system, through which this net-zero transformation will be shaped and implemented. The result is that the public do not feel a particular sense of ownership of – or responsibility for – the changes that they will be expected to adopt and/or underwrite (e.g. taxation). Such a situation is surely undermining the legitimacy of net-zero and any mandate to deliver on the UK's net-zero targets.

5. The need for a governance system fit for a just transition

We find a situation in the UK where the majority of the British public is increasingly frustrated by the extent to which they can engage with - and benefit from - a net zero transition. This is reflective of wider debates approaches to a just transition. As defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO), a just transition constitutes the "greening the economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind" (UNDP 2022). In a just transition, the benefits and burdens of a shift to net zero are fairly distributed in society.

Underpinning this definition is a commitment to deliver decarbonisation in accordance with the principles of *distributional* (the distribution of costs and benefits), *recognition* (who is recognised by decision making), *procedural* (who is involved in decision making), and restorative (ameliorating past injustices and mitigating futures ones) justice (Bray and Ford 2021). The broad idea being that if we can deliver on these principles a wider range of socio-economic outcomes will be achieved in parallel with decarbonisation, including but not limited to the following (Just Transition Commission 2024):

- Avoid entrenching old injustices or creating new ones
- Reduced local and regional inequality
- Reduced economic inequality
- Increased sense of agency
- Increased trust in local institutions and decision making
- Increasing community ownership
- Equip people with the education and training required to develop skills and gain access to fair jobs
- Creation of access to green, fair and high-value work within a more open and fair job market

The theory goes that realising these outcomes through climate action will – on balance – serve to empower and enrich the British public; bolstering their support for net-zero.

Importantly however, our current approach to net-zero is not delivering just outcomes, as emphasised by Scotland Just Transition Commission's (2024) review that finds "that without a step-change we are now at risk of going backwards on this agenda in Scotland" (p.21). The final report of Scotland's second Just Transition Commission (2026) finds "that progress has fallen short of what is needed" and "unless we renew our ambition and redouble our efforts, the enormous opportunity – both for meaningful climate action and for reducing inequality - will be lost" (p.13).

This lack of progress against a just transition is surely a symptom of seeking to deliver net-zero via an incumbent socio-economic system that is 'hard wired' to replicate embedded injustices and inequalities. In other words, a just transition is unlikely to come to pass if existing social and economic structures are reproduced by a net-zero transition, instead of being reimagined and transformed.

There is therefore a pressing need to identify better ways of governing net-zero interventions, which are designed to encourage place-based solutions that provide multiple co-benefits and enhance justice. Climate action will need to be reflective of - and responsive to - households and communities lived experience and their needs. It will also need to simultaneously help address other challenges that facing society, such as our struggling high streets, ageing infrastructure, public health and cost of living.

This vision begs other questions, such as:

- How are we currently governing a net-zero transition?
- Where do the decision making powers lie and how are these distributed across different groups, sectors and places?
- Which groups are being represented as part of this decision making process and how?

- What are the justice implications of the UK's current governance approach?
- How might alternative governance approaches (e.g. polycentric versus monocentric governance[9]) help to enhance the likelihood of just outcomes?

To help answer these, the JUST-Systems project draws together five in-depth case studies of low-carbon transformations from across the UK, critiquing how effectively these interventions have realised 'just' place-based outcomes, through decarbonisation. Specifically, the project will examine how these outcomes have been supported, or frustrated, by the wider governance systems that they form a part of.

This will first involve a mapping exercise, to understand the structure and functionality of the UK's current net-zero governance system. Second, through the examination and cross-comparison of the case studies, we will consider how effectively this system is helping to unlock net-zero projects capable of enriching and empowering communities in a 'just' manner. Thirdly, by synthesising evidence of where we identify examples of where this is – and is not – working effectively, and triangulating this with other research, we will formulate recommendations for how this approach might be re-calibrated in the future. Finally, we will stress-test these draft recommendations and co-create final recommendations with stakeholders, who are directly involved in governance.

In conclusion, the way we are governing the UK's net-zero transition is beginning to wear thin on the British public, at the very same time UK government requires their 'buy in' to decarbonise the more complex, people-centred sectors of transport, heating and food. A breakdown in the public support for climate action could derail its net-zero transition.

Through JUST-Systems' research, we will explore alternative ways of governing net-zero that better empower and enrich the British public, to ensure the UK meets its net-zero targets, whilst forging a fairer, happier future for us all.

[9] "An ideal type monocentric system is one controlled by a central predominant authority (e.g. a comprehensive governmental authority or private monopoly responsible for all goods and services). By contrast, a polycentric system comprises multiple governing authorities at different scales which do not stand in hierarchical relationship to each other but are engaged in self-organisation and mutual adjustment (Ostrom, 2010)" (Morrison et al. 2010 p.1).

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