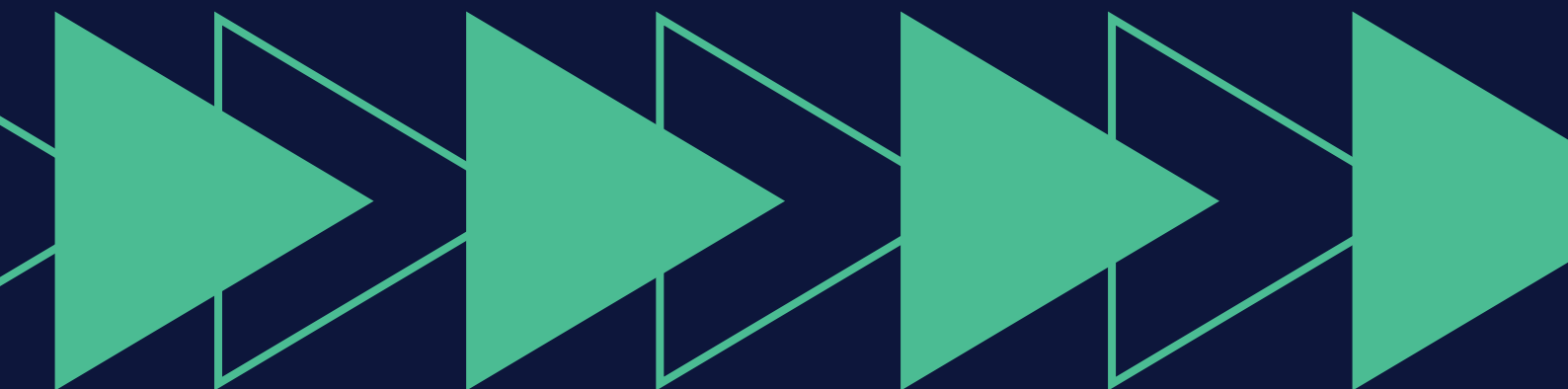


# **Our journey to net zero:** Understanding household and community participation in the UK's transition to a greener future

**Policy brief | October 2023**



## Reading this policy brief

This policy brief presents recommendations for how to leave no household behind in the UK's transition to a greener future, known commonly as reaching net zero. It provides key insights about the risks – and opportunities – for different groups, and provides a new framework for how to design policy *with and for* households and communities that can support even the most vulnerable through the uncertain but necessary process of net zero transition.

First and foremost, it is intended to support policymakers at national and local levels to design policy more inclusively for net zero. It also seeks to inform how investors and funders, civil society, employers, and other key actors can better support vulnerable households and communities through net zero – through their individual roles, and collectively by working in partnership.

The research drawn on for this brief develops and explores scenarios for how the transition to net zero might affect households and communities. It identifies where there are risks of unequal impacts, or risks of households being left behind. It also highlights barriers to, and opportunities for, households taking part in a just transition.

The research was undertaken by the Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation, the University of York, the University of Leeds, and Trinity College Dublin, and funded by the Nuffield Foundation. At the outset, researchers brought together, for the first time, in-depth participatory primary research and a systematic review of the poverty and social justice literature, with literature and data on scenarios of change towards the UK's net zero future. Findings were then shared with local government and with communities in four local authorities in a process of policy co-production, looking at what incentives, levers, and policies might unlock greater, inclusive participation in transition.

The findings identify many barriers to participation that need to be removed by policies and support schemes. Equally, they show many opportunities for how participation in low-carbon living can be built across different areas of household and community life – and the potential positive benefits people see transition having for their lives at home, their local communities, and their experience of fairness in key areas of life.

This brief accompanies a full report of the findings of the research, which identify what can unlock their capabilities to make greater, low-carbon, changes at home, in work, travel, lifestyles, and in their local communities. Central to the recommendations that flow from the research findings is the need to create a distributed, local effort towards transition. This will make achieving decarbonisation targets more viable; make transition outcomes more inclusive; and accelerate the UK's progress towards net zero.

# Understanding the human side of transition to net zero

Reaching the UK's decarbonisation goals requires the participation of *everyone*, in all parts of the UK. But that carries risk, due to the need for large-scale change in how we live, spend, travel, work, eat, and have fun.

Current debates about the transition to net zero focus on industry and technological solutions. There is a lack of discussion, evidence, and policy that addresses real, human questions about the action needed from different households and communities, different sectors and places, and the disruption that transition will bring. Furthermore, if decarbonisation policies are designed and implemented without this in mind, net zero transition risks pushing already vulnerable families and communities further into deprivation, exclusion, and destitution. The research documented in this report aims to change where the debate currently sits, to bring to the fore the human impacts and positive opportunities for communities of net zero transition.

A just transition is defined by the International Labour Organisation<sup>1</sup> as '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'.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1980s, the debate has widened from focusing on economies and worker rights, to also include how welfare, services, housing, political rights and freedoms, and decent quality of life should be maintained for everyone during the process of decarbonising a society. Policies and strategies working towards a just transition should ensure that the benefits of net zero are shared widely, and mitigate harms or provide support to those who stand to lose. However, if policymakers fail to consider the distribution of costs and benefits, there is a risk that existing inequalities in society will be exacerbated, and new ones created.

<sup>1</sup> ILO, 2022

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



# Developing a 'person-centred, place-based' approach to net zero policy that supports every household

Our research presents a framework to help policymakers, investors, and actors across civil society to strategically – and collectively – plan how to support households and local communities through a just transition. The framework demonstrates the need for a radically different approach to shaping policies for a just transition. It presents what we call a 'person-centred, place-based approach' that accounts for the variable opportunities and risks faced by different households and communities, and prioritises how to achieve fairness outcomes alongside decarbonisation in the necessary shift to low-carbon living required for a sustainable future.

The framework is built from understanding, in the round, how areas of life will change for households in transition to net zero and the way the *risks of exclusion, types of participation, and mediating effect of place and community conditions* interact to make change harder or easier. As achieving decarbonisation goals requires action from every household, 'person-centred' means we focus on the purpose of policy in offering different pathways to build inclusive, fair participation for all, and recognise that people have intersecting barriers to participation that need to be removed. 'Place-based' reflects that households exist within local communities, which have different social, economic, and infrastructural conditions that make net zero transition – and those pathways to participation – more or less accessible. Figure 1 presents this framework, below.

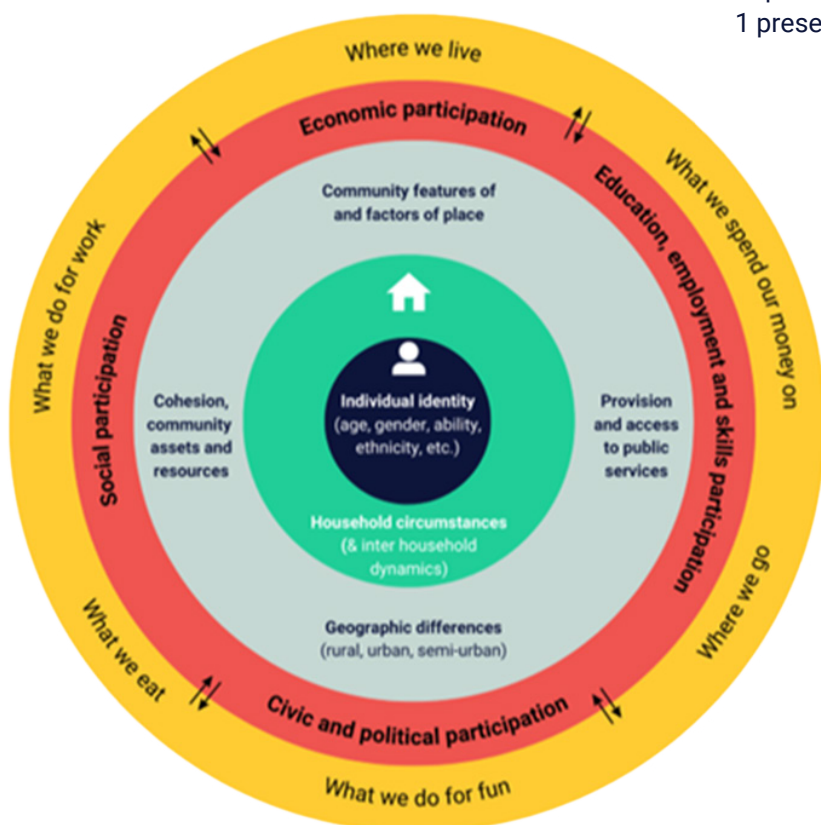


Figure 1: A person-centred, place-based approach to supporting household and community capability for net zero.



## How to use the framework

The framework can be used to design policy in a different way. It foregrounds the integration of the policies and schemes that affect households across the multiple areas of net zero policy - not policy silos'. Applying the framework, policy design must account for how changes in each area of life will be shaped by people's ability to participate, which is in turn affected by the household they are part of, and the features of their community, including social and geographic factors. Moreover, vulnerabilities to change in different areas of life are found to be interdependent in the context of net zero transition. Where a household faces greater pressure in one area (for example, increased food or energy prices) this will have knock-on effects to their access to and agency for change in other areas of life (such as mobility or leisure). Looking at opportunities for participation through applying the framework to design policy with communities therefore helps us understand the interconnectedness of the areas of life affected by net zero. Where removing one key barrier, or putting in place one key policy lever, can unlock multiple low-carbon choices and build participation.

The key findings of our work with communities identifying risks and opportunities for participation are presented below. The findings have shaped policy recommendations for applying the framework. Applying the framework as part of a policy process enables us to understand key profiles of household and communities at risk; to recognise different starting points to making low-carbon choices for households; to identify different pathways for participation where barriers need to be removed; and opportunities to *build* participation that can in turn be designed into policy.

Recommendations for policy design, including what some key policy levers to unlock participation may look like, are presented below.



# The risk of widening inequalities in the transition to net zero



Despite uncertainties about net zero commitments in parts of national government, the need to ensure households and communities are protected from both climate impacts, and inequalities caused by the design of environmental policies, is fundamental. The UK government's own Mission Zero (2022) report noted transition is not 'risk free' for households and communities. The evidence is clear that net zero transition will lead to potential trade-offs between social, economic and environmental objectives. Both evidence from research and assessments of current policies also suggest that these objectives are hard to meet concurrently<sup>3</sup> and there is an urgent need for greater policy integration between currently siloed departments of government.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, households and communities in the UK do not start their journey towards transition from a place that is equal. Substantial concerns have been raised about the potential for the transition to net zero to disproportionately impact those already experiencing disadvantages.<sup>5</sup>

If the potential social, economic and environmental trade-offs are poorly managed, the transition risks pushing already vulnerable families and communities further into deprivation, exclusion, and crisis.

<sup>3</sup> See Gillard et al., 2017; Hasegawa et al., 2018; Hussein et al., 2013; Robinson and Shine, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> See Mandelli 2022.

<sup>5</sup> See Caplan, 2017; Kennedy and Snell, 2021; Snell, 2022.

## Understanding the key profiles at risk

Our review of the available published evidence identifies the following profiles of households and communities that have specific risks in transition to net zero. Households and communities with one or more of the following characteristics are at **'high risk' of exclusion**. These characteristics are exacerbated by, but not exclusive to, low-income status.

### Households

Households with no or low savings and high levels of debt; no or little flexibility in living costs and spending power; high economic and social dependencies (caring; parenting; time-poor due to work demands) have significant barriers to transition and risks of exclusion due to constraints in being able to afford upfront, or ongoing costs of home adaptations or other adjustments such as changes to travel.

Households with tenancy status; or part, social or shared ownership; that constrains decision-making power over home adaptation and retrofit, and energy use.

Households heavily reliant on vehicles for work or personal use.

Households with experience of low, no or under-employment in job markets.

Households with long-term under-development of skills and limited access to training and development opportunities for 'green' jobs.

Households located within isolated or remote communities with limited services and amenities, limited or expensive public transport, or limited civic and social infrastructure (such as libraries and parks) which provides less visible routes to support their understanding of what to do in transition, and their engagement as a result.

Households located within communities with low voting and civic engagement levels and/or limited democratic or community participation structures, have less ability to voice the inequities they are experiencing in transition, and may feel disenfranchised from policy choices, meaning they are less likely to participate.

### Communities

Communities with high density of high-rise housing, which have few public spaces - affecting electric vehicles (EVs) and low-carbon infrastructure supply. Or communities with little green space - affecting leisure, health and biodiversity engagement.

Communities with limited access to amenities or public services locally.

Communities with poor public transport connectivity to centres of work or essential public services, or expensive public transport infrastructure.

Communities in 'pockets' of deprivation, or in severance conditions where the neighbourhood is cut off by poor transport infrastructure, natural conditions, or infrastructural design.

Communities with a lack of community assets and social infrastructure, such as parks and libraries.

Existing and emerging inequalities will also mean some neighbourhoods and communities have harder journeys through net zero transition, as well as different places having varying risk of climate change impacts (such as flooding). This means a more targeted approach is needed to develop transition strategies, accounting for the different starting points, vulnerabilities and assets of different places in the UK.



# Understanding the starting point for households and communities

Existing research and policy typically focus on one dimension of change (eg, transport), often narrowing discussions to technical risks or public perception. Our research seeks to change this; to focus on the human and place implications of transition.

We worked directly with households and local communities at risk of being left behind in the transition, to build rich and detailed accounts of what meaningful participation would look like in different people's everyday lives.

Using the person-centred, place-based approach, we explored how multiple areas of life needed to change in net zero transition, and the intersecting impacts of these in human terms. We explored with participants how these changes will affect people's ability to meaningfully participate in the transition to net zero in everyday life. We also examined different existing transition policies with participants, to understand their accessibility, suitability and enabling power – or not – for different households, and communities.

The sections below summarise findings from our research on the risks of exclusion and structural constraints faced by households and communities. This approach focuses on agency: understanding what people can and cannot do at different points and times - with the resources available to them – to help us identify where households have assets, or barriers, that prevent them from participating.

We consider four types of participation that are fundamental to achieving social inclusion in society: economic; social; civic and political; and regarding education, employment and skills.<sup>6</sup> We then apply this logic to how we understand households' participation in net zero transition.

People's ability to participate is in turn affected by the household, community and place they are part of. Therefore, understanding the conditions and characteristics of the place and community a household sits in is vital to understanding their capacity for net zero transition.

We also explore how the design of economic support impacts on how inclusive transition can be for households. This represents the most important challenge to achieving fairness *and* decarbonisation outcomes, with a large proportion of households at risk of entering what we call 'transition poverty' - where their spending powers and budgets do not have the contingency to withstand volatile increases or changing cost demands associated with the way the economy, infrastructure and fundamentals such as food, fuel and services are decarbonised.

6 (Levitas et al, 2007)





## Barriers to economic participation

1

High upfront costs of retrofit and buying new technologies, and the running costs of green technologies, can restrict participation and make technology unattainable to households.

2

Ongoing fluctuation in the cost of living has created concerns about household spending power being able to keep up with net zero-related changes.

3

Restricted choice in the design of available capital funding means households have limited access to different types of financial support needed to invest in making changes.

4

Split financial incentives - where investment to retrofit the home, for example, is distributed unfairly between tenants and landlords - are having contradictory influences. The risk of having limited power over making changes is particularly acute for those who do not own their homes, but also for homeowners of hard-to-adapt housing.



*We've done all we can in the house to reduce our energy consumption - all I could afford. I've got a new boiler, but it's not the heat pump one because...I can't afford it...I'm making draft excluders, I'm going to make curtains to some of the doors...not turning the heating on and all that. But, of course, that's more economic necessity....I can't afford anything more than I've done.*

#2, Neighbourhood 1

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*You can be ... just £2 over the limit [for being eligible for a government grant]. Yeah, my mum's in this category...who finally got the pension. And she's something like £3 over not being able to claim anything at all... that's ridiculous.*

#79, Neighbourhood 1

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*And if I apply for solar panels, first thing, all these companies do a credit search. They do a soft credit search instantly to see if you can afford [it].*

#810, Neighbourhood 2

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## Barriers to social participation

1

Households with high or volatile dependencies, such as those caring for relatives, might experience changes related to travel that make fulfilling their caring responsibilities harder or more time-consuming.

2

A poor and patchy local ecosystem of social connectivity and green transport infrastructure makes it challenging to engage in low-carbon forms of social participation in the transition.

3

Informal structures that build social participation are lacking across many neighbourhoods, despite being important for households. Having spaces and relationships to interact and communicate helps to identify opportunities to engage in low-carbon living.



*When you come from a deprived estate and you're living on the breadline, obviously, I feel my resistance to give up our car. If I did give up the car, it would have a massive impact on...what we can do for [our children]. So you know, things like being able to participate in sports club, being able to participate in after-school clubs. The fact [is] that these things aren't on your doorstep and you do need to be able to toddle about to give them life skills and opportunities.*

#355, Neighbourhood 3

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*I think, from a community social point of view, we live in quite a close-knit community, we do often sort of share news .... we'll do that when we drop the kids off together, things like that. And there's a lot of passing of clothes and toys and things, so we were quite good at recycling.*

#486, Neighbourhood 5

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*One of my children who's had to come home because he really can't afford to live, you know, in rented accommodation at the moment. So he's joined the household again. Before he joined it, I had quite a nice organised, relatively 'green' household...My son is using up a huge amount of energy now he is back...practically 90% of the energy in the household, so he can be a bit of a drain.*

#17, Neighbourhood 1

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## Barriers to civic and political participation

1

A 'knowledge vacuum' prevents people adopting 'green' household practices. This is worsened by a lack of government-led, trusted information in clear, accessible language about net zero.

2

Tenancy and homeownership status reduces bargaining power in some cases, influencing whether individuals have the agency and power to retrofit their homes, insulate, or switch energy supplies, and whether they can participate in net zero and low-carbon behaviours.

3

Mixed messaging around net zero from government and local government, about the scale of change needed, and the ask on individuals and households, can create a sense of overwhelm and disempowerment.

4

Under-resourced social infrastructure and opportunities for neighbourhood organising risks a missed opportunity to build participation, primarily through grassroots and hyperlocal activity.

5

Uneven and underpowered infrastructure for political participation in net zero limits households' influence through formal decision-making mechanisms at a local and national scale.



*I get annoyed at a lack of resources to make a decision. For instance, if you wanted to buy a new fire, and you google a AA rated fire, the only people you can get information from is probably the manufacturers, which don't actually have to be right. So, you can think you're doing something that is going to save you money, which actually isn't because they're not governed properly...as we found out [with] the emissions and...So where do you find the truth? If that makes any sense?*

#146, Neighbourhood 2

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*We can have solar panels fitted or we can have a heat pump, both of which require us to have long, protracted arguments with the housing association. Our house is [a] freehold house. Therefore, technically everything from the ground up belongs to us but according to the housing association because it's on their land, everything that's loft and above is theirs...the housing association has to step up and fully insulate the building.*

#724, Neighbourhood 4

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## Barriers to education, employment, and skills participation

1

Barriers to retraining and upskilling for those who are unemployed, or long term under-employed, create obstacles for their participation in a greener economy.

2

These barriers to retraining in turn fuel scepticism about employers' willingness to upskill or re-train their existing employees, as opposed to hiring those who already have the necessary skills. This affects peoples' willingness to participate in retraining schemes or to seek jobs in 'green sectors'.

3

The employment market fails to support people who *are* employed to transfer their skills to a green economy, leaving behind those with less access to retraining opportunities.

4

Poor leadership, interest, and compliance by employers, with regard to making change and taking part in the transition to net zero, prevents working people engaging in transition through their jobs, even where there is motivation. This is a missed opportunity given employers are seen as a trusted source of information of what to do in net zero.



*So if you're over the age of 60, you're not in the job market. That's true. Because if you go to work and have to do two to three years of training, you only have a few years left of working so no one is going to look at you.*

#841, Neighbourhood 4

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*My boss definitely only cares about money... And like, you can't just go at him like, oh, well, we need to do this, this and this, because he'll just think I'll have to pay for more...*

#528, Neighbourhood 6

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*When I think one of the problems will be training people in the new industries because still...certainly the building colleges are not yet really geared up to training people how to do a heat source pump for automotive, how do you repair an electric vehicle?*

#341, Neighbourhood 2

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## Identifying different pathways for participation

The conditions that shape decision-making in people's everyday lives do not exist in neat categories. However, findings from our research made it possible to identify different pathways for participation and non-participation, taking into account how households' constraints interact with and compound each other. This suggests different levers and actions will work for different profiles of households and communities.

Our research found that enabling **economic participation** by removing economic barriers, and improving economic resilience, strongly underpins *all other types of participation* pivotal to achieving a just transition.

**Financial support**, such as long-term loans that are not inhibited by credit or debt levels, is fundamental. Our research indicates this would enable the poorest households to start on the journey of transition, and be a powerful lever for building engagement.

**Support packages** should differ to account for 'person-centred' factors, including housing ownership or tenancy status; debt and credit status; and households' interdependencies of short-, mid- and long-term spending needs and powers – rather than being organised solely by income.

The evidence reviewed also shows that the economic risk to households will change as pricing, supplies and shifts to new technologies and ways of life are required across the transition timeline to reach net zero. How these economic risks will impact the poorest families, and furthermore how they constrain their agency to make other low-carbon choices, are significant findings of our research.



## Opportunities to build participation

Our research with participants also found opportunities to support households' participation in transition – explained as key levers that can be designed into policy. **Civic spaces** such as schools, colleges, social networks and community infrastructure currently support peoples' **climate and consumption literacy** (namely, how people understand the amount of energy they are consuming and their carbon footprint). In many communities, these create intergenerational and hyperlocal spaces to support people to take agency towards sustainable living.

Community infrastructure also provides a setting for building **relational power**, driving cooperation between households and their local community, which supports collective action to reduce costs to individuals. **Digital infrastructure** – such as broadband or spaces with internet access, alongside access to training designed to narrow the digital divide – supports access to information, sustains social relations, and improves access to support schemes. Finally, **access to green spaces** serves to promote low-carbon leisure, building social relations, better health, and even greater food autonomy. These are crucial opportunities at the community level to build participation.

**The role of employers** in supporting households to understand and adopt 'climate positive' behaviours because of how people are having to comply with low-carbon practices in the workplace – as well as employers' role in enabling the purchasing of green technologies, such as electric cars - were also found to be significant. Employers can also support greater participation by promoting green behaviours (for example, allowing working from home, which reduces the carbon footprint of commuting) and offering opportunities for training and re-skilling.

**Skills and retraining programmes**, and opportunities to access jobs in green economies, were found to encourage people to accept and participate in other areas of low-carbon living, building trust in transition as a positive change; as were powerful, **local visions** for how net zero could improve peoples' neighbourhoods and livelihoods. The presence of engagement and influencing structures at the local level – such as community action plans, resident groups, or citizen panels in local policymaking - can also provide clear and accessible routes to civic participation.

This is a non-exhaustive list, and our full report identifies other levers that can support policy design to build participation.





# Policy recommendations for a fairer transition to net zero

A key recommendation of this research is for government to explore the feasibility of a more joined-up, holistic system to deliver net zero, focused on person-centred and place-based policies that can reconcile decarbonisation and fairness outcomes.

'Top down' and 'macro-led' approaches involving a limited number of actors are not going to deliver fair outcomes from transition. Instead, we need a different way of prioritising policy and funding, and a national strategy that foregrounds participation at home, in communities, and in the change to low-carbon living in society. We propose a more integrated approach to policy design, and a more integrated, collective system of actors across local and national level. This would better support mitigating exclusions and build collective, place-based strategies that leverage more inclusive opportunities for participation.

**Figure 2** shares how this approach could work.

To achieve this, we make the following recommendations from this research, in order of prioritisation for policymakers at local and national level:





**Apply the framework of a person-centred, place-based approach to policy development at local and national government level.** Fit-for-purpose 'Just Transition' policies must be underpinned by a deep understanding of the barriers, capabilities and opportunities of those who are already – or highly likely to be – adversely affected by the transition to net zero. Policies must recognise the household as a whole unit, not dissected and addressed through traditional policy silos.

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**National policy should remove the most significant barriers for the poorest households** and take a person-centred approach to design economic incentives that support participation in the transition. This might include providing economic support to cover the largest upfront costs of retrofit or changing transport, and support to cushion changes to day-to-day costs of food, fuel and pricing. Such costs are unavoidable if the poorest households are to reach net zero, so policies for economic support must account for households' whole spending power and budget constraints.

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**Explore alternative levels of governance for net zero policy with distributed powers.** Further exploration by research and policymakers is needed to understand whether the current system is best organised by local authority or combined authority (regional) governance, to affect the economic and infrastructural changes necessary. We propose an integrated system for a fair transition to identify what works in each context, and then create a specific vision and plan for each geographic area, built around decarbonisation and fairness aims, and with devolved powers, alongside clear strategies for integrated working across local authorities, anchor institutions, and local communities.

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**Engage people in the design of fair outcomes in local policymaking,** and through civil society and community organisations, to enable a place-focused, inclusive debate during, and as a result of, net zero transition. This must recognise the inequalities and injustices faced by specific groups and places, and engage the public meaningfully in decision-making through local civic participation structures.

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**Build collective action and policy for net zero transition with and around places** through local policymaking and public-private partnerships for investment. Our research strongly indicates that motivation to participate in net zero is stronger when connected to 'place'. A closely joined-up ecosystem of innovation and action is needed across local government, public-private partnerships, innovators, the voluntary and community sector, and communities themselves to enable a fair transition to happen for all households within the UK. The integrated care system provides a useful model to draw inspiration from in the design of this.

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**Local leaders, civic actors and investors should adopt a data-driven, ‘place readiness’ approach.** This will support those leading strategies towards net zero to make considered choices and broker initiatives and partnerships, maximising action on high-potential places to accelerate decarbonisation. It will also help mitigate risks. We propose our ‘Index of Readiness for Net Zero’ as a valuable tool to create faster, fairer progress on areas of high potential for action within local communities.



**Update the existing Climate Change Committee (CCC) Risk Assessment** to provide a broad and true picture of community and household vulnerabilities in transition across the UK. This means extending the existing CCC Assessment to fully account for place, expanding its current scope beyond hard infrastructure, and accounting for a much greater set of social, asset-based, social infrastructure measures. The findings of this new assessment should drive a national strategy for public participation in a just transition.

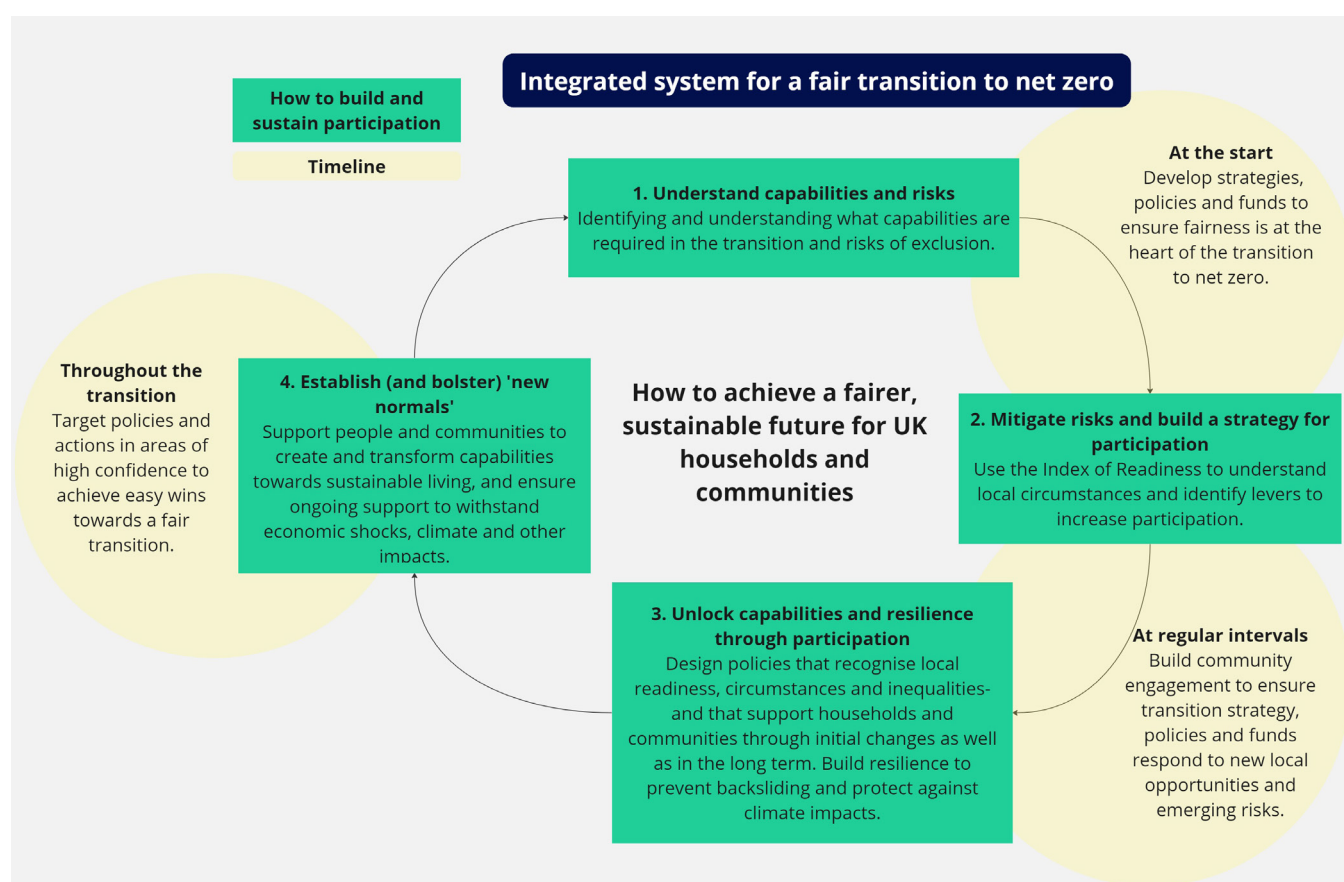


Figure 2: The Institute for Community Studies’ vision of an integrated system for a fair transition.

## Conclusion

Understanding routes to supporting households and communities as they transition to a net zero future offers an opportunity to drive a collective, cultural response to the challenges we face. This research calls for policy that will build participation, recognising the need for diverse approaches that will work for different starting points, in different places. It takes into account the reality of people's dynamic, lived experiences, and their family and community relationships, and recognises that these impact on people's motivations and decision-making in the context of participating in net zero transition.

Our research identifies the importance of places and the power of communities in shaping how easy or hard transition is for households, according to where they live. In particular, we see opportunities to revisit existing policies – particularly those with limited uptake – to identify how they could be better enabled by local environments.

We suggest that a fair, integrated transition system would require a specific vision and plan for each local authority area in the UK. These should be built around a set of joint decarbonisation and fairness aims and devolved powers and governance to regional level, alongside clear strategies for integrated working across local authorities and anchor institutions. This would maximise participation for different households and help meet both sets of outcomes. Meanwhile, using a place-based approach focused on varying 'readiness' could drive more targeted policy and action. This could inform how local government spending, and investment strategies for public-private partnership, can address particular place- and person-based vulnerabilities and maximise where there are assets to accelerate a fair transition.

Our research with participants found that where people find agency to make changes that will contribute to a greener future; and where they can trust information, make confident choices based on it, and reduce acute financial risks – then **the majority of people want to participate in net zero.**

Reaching the decarbonisation goals that could protect our environment, livelihoods and, indeed, lives from further climate impacts, requires the participation of every household to shift to low-carbon living. Our findings from this research show this can be done more effectively and inclusively, and in ways that lead to fairer outcomes, by accounting for peoples' different starting points; by working through the involvement of households and communities in a person-centred way; and by maximising the potential of place.



# Acknowledgements

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Samanthi Themini-mulle (Institute for Community Studies), Tania Carregha (Institute for Community Studies), Emily Morrison (Institute for Community Studies), Lucie Middlemiss (University of Leeds), Carolyn Snell (University of York), Yekaterina Chzhen (Trinity College Dublin), Kelli Kennedy (University of York), with contributions from Anne Owen (University of Leeds) and Richard Harries (Institute for Community Studies).

This research was done in partnership with the University of Leeds, University of York and Trinity College Dublin. The authors would also like to thank members of our Advisory Group: Alex Beer, Patrick Gould, Liz O'Driscoll, Prof. Jane Wills, Andrew Richmond, David Craine, Helen Stockton, Dr Elizabeth Blakelock, Prof. Jane Robinson, Jonathan Bradshaw, Amelie Trepas, and Harriet Thompson. We would also like to extend thanks to Anne Owen (University of Leeds), Gill Main, Richard Harries (The Young Foundation), Jessica Moore (The Young Foundation) and Helen Goulden (The Young Foundation).



## Funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

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Website: [icstudies.org.uk](http://icstudies.org.uk)

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