

Improvement Service response to the [parliamentary inquiry into the role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net-zero Scotland](#)

January 2022

About Our Organisation

The Improvement Service (IS) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net-zero Scotland. As the 'go to' organisation for Local Government improvement in Scotland, we have a vision to be an agile organisation that supports and mobilises resources for our partners to manage the challenges they face in improving outcomes and reducing inequalities.

Our Strategic Framework (https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/21787/framework-2020-final.pdf) identifies climate change as a key driver and our Business Plan (https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/24621/Business-Plan-2021-22v5.pdf) commits us to providing practical improvement support to councils, embedding this agenda across all our programmes. Our recent Net Zero Statement (https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0034/27979/net-zero-statement.pdf) develops this commitment, to give direction and focus to our activity, and enable us to better support Local Government and partners to rebuild effectively post Covid 19.

We work closely with partners such as COSLA, SOLACE and the Sustainable Scotland Network and the Professional Associations of the Scottish Local Authorities' Economic Development Group (SLAED), Heads of Planning (HOPS) and the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland (SCOTS) This unique position and reach across Local Government offers valuable insight and the potential to make a difference through targeted practical support.

Council planning, decision-making and capacity in relation to net zero

1. How effective are councils at strategic planning, budgeting, and making procurement decisions that align with net zero goals? If there are barriers, what are they?

Local Government is committed, and working urgently, to embed net zero targets and goals in strategic planning, budgeting and procurement decisions. The sector has a crucial role to play in delivering national ambitions.

A range of activity is underway to translate net zero goals into organisation wide programmes and decision making. There is a variability in approach to aligning goals and spend and evidencing and costing action plans which would be improved by national efforts to build on existing reporting requirements and guidance. Net zero goals need to be aligned with all current and emerging policies at national and local level.

Some councils have completed in depth analysis of the impact of their operations and established carbon budgets for different departments and this is being explored by other councils. Others are embedding climate impact assessments or reporting requirements in their committee structures. However, officers who are not specialists in climate change need training and support to enable them to better understand the implications for their role. We need to explore how current and any potential future resources could be used to support this.

Other councils have little or no framework in place to shape decision-making around climate impacts and carbon budgets. There may be an overall target but action plans are lacking and there is a need to coordinate action and implementation urgently.

One of the main barriers is that all officers and Elected Members need to have the skills and understanding to engage with the net zero agenda from being able to complete impact assessments and reports to leadership and decision making capability. We are working to develop an understanding of the skills and capacity needed and to build

connections across departments and service areas. We have delivered sessions on climate change with our professional networks including our Change Manager's and Organisational Development Networks. We also organised a workshop with the Sustainable Scotland Network and SLAED to bring together economic development and sustainability professionals. This was well received and supported new contacts and understanding. For Elected Members, we are developing resources and webinars, which enable a better understanding of their critical role. We are also supporting the Scottish Cities Alliance to deliver Carbon Literacy training to Elected Members and senior officers.

There needs to be more effective sharing and usage of data and information. We are supporting the Sustainable Scotland Network Local Authority Forums and the Scottish Cities Alliance in their work to promote peer to peer knowledge sharing between officers and Elected Members. As part of COP26, COSLA and the IS collected case studies from across Scotland and we are now exploring how to use these to drive further engagement and knowledge sharing. We are also developing how to embed climate change in our existing data activity through the Local Government Benchmarking Framework and opportunities to improve our services. There also needs to be engagement and support in accessing and using this data to make decisions. We are meeting regularly with Audit Scotland to coordinate activity.

There is also the opportunity for better public sector coordination in procurement to deliver local benefits and overcome barriers such as economies of scale. Organisations such as Scotland Excel can support.

2. What role can the local government planning system and local development plans do to help us reach net zero? Could the planning system do more?

As the ongoing reform of Scotland's planning system progressed, recognition of the role of successful places in delivering Scotland's National Outcomes, including the role of net zero, grew. The Spatial Planning, Health and Wellbeing Collaborative formed and identified one crucial challenge: the need for a consistent and comprehensive list of what every place must have for people to thrive. A set of outcomes for every place to enable wellbeing. This work resulted in the development of Place and Wellbeing Outcomes., which fall into five overarching themes of movement, spaces, resources, civic and stewardship. They are underpinned by the principles of equitable outcomes for all; climate change, sustainability and biodiversity; and supporting the system by embedding the right policies and plans both nationally and locally. They provide a consistent foundation for measuring and a platform for learning about how we can all make changes in our systems to improve the health of our communities and to also support climate targets and reduce inequalities, creating a triple win.

The most effective means by which to achieve the consistent use of the Place and Wellbeing Outcomes across Scotland is to embed them in the fourth National Planning Framework and for them to then be used as a lens for all decisions. This would likely give planning officers at local authorities the confidence to make decisions which make a positive contribution to net zero.

Nearly all aspects of climate change will require work that must be carried out across local authority boundaries. Co-ordination of activity will be vital and need to explore national initiatives around how to improve this. Joint working across local planning authority boundaries can be the most robust and cost-efficient way to prepare the evidence base and ensure efficiencies. Organisations like the IS and RTPi can support with this knowledge building and skills development, promoting a practical and outcome focused approach. There is a need for skills development for future needs and priorities, working with graduate planners coming into the system through to experienced professionals.

3. What innovation, skills and capacity are needed in the local government workforce when it comes to making net zero achievable? Does that capacity exist or are there gaps?

Reaching net zero requires large scale system transformation and Local Government needs to have the capacity and political drive to be innovative. The impact of responding to Covid 19 has stretched already strained resources to deliver critical day to day services and yet Local Government has proven the ability to act quickly to tackle an emergency.

Given the scale of the challenge and the associated policies and legislation, there is a need to clarify what local authorities need to deliver and be aware of what is within their control and the power of influence. There needs to be a strong understanding of climate change and the roles that local authorities can play. In particular, there is a need for a better understanding of the connection between health, climate change and equity. If designed correctly,

interventions to tackle climate change can deliver co benefits for individuals, communities and benefits. We are planning to explore this area throughout 2022.

There is a need to embed net zero skills in every existing role and we are working to identify and understand the gaps in capacity and skills amongst officers and Elected Members. Different stakeholders require different levels of understanding and capability – there is a need to understand in more detail the skills that are needed at national level quickly and then move to delivery and support. We believe that there is a range of support needed from technical and financial skills through to project management, leadership and mainstreaming, particularly in the key sectors of transport and decarbonisation of heat.

It is important to recognise that an awareness of net zero is insufficient to drive the transformation needed, and there must be a focus on practical and tangible actions and the connection with other priorities and policies. We identified the toolkits from the Carbon Literacy Project for local authorities as a way to provide a baseline of knowledge and understanding with a focus on action. We are working with the Scottish Cities Alliance to deliver this training to Elected Members and senior officers.

Some councils may struggle to access the expertise needed and the different structures and capacity across Scotland must be recognised and developed. Organisations like Adaptation Scotland and the Sustainable Scotland Network are effective in pulling together examples, forums and guidance but more could be done to support and develop this. There are examples of regional groups coming together to share information such as through Climate Ready Clyde. Existing structures and organisations can also come together to drive improvement. The joint briefing by the IS, COSLA, the Sustainable Scotland Network and NatureScot on nature based solutions for Elected Members is an example of the benefits of partnership working

(https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0019/26434/EM-Briefing-Nature-Based-Solutions.pdf) We are also looking to build relationships with academia to capture and share innovative ways of thinking and working.

In addition, Local Government must work in partnership with stakeholders across their geography. There is an opportunity to bring all the organisations in this field together to provide a more coordinated support network for Local Government and its partners. Establishing climate commissions as ‘critical friends’ is an emerging approach to local knowledge and buy in and there could be further support in how best to do this including communication to engagement strategies to bring together the different sectors and communities.

Partnering to achieve net zero goals

4. How well do councils leverage in support and finance from the private sector for net zero delivery? Are City Region Deals being used effectively for this? What mechanisms or forums are there for sharing opportunities and good practice?

Councils are focusing on being innovative in how they leverage support and finance with joint venture partnerships and actively seeking opportunities to leverage private sector funding and expertise. There are efforts across Scotland to engage the private sector through charters and pledges and preparation of project pipelines for investment. There needs to be capacity and skills to develop this further. With the City Region Deals there is a need for a holistic and adaptable approach that recognises the relationship between climate change, economy and health. The Sustainable Scotland Network would be well placed to share good practice, along with SLAED and the Scottish Cities Alliance.

5. How well do councils involve local communities in decision-making on major net zero projects and how do they support community-led initiatives?

Meaningful engagement and empowerment of communities in certain elements of delivering net zero is essential to delivering the necessary transformation, particularly for a just transition. For communities to be involved, it must be relevant and understood as something they can and want to contribute towards. Councils need to be supported to articulate the co benefits of net zero action and the connection with other priorities into a place based approach. There are examples of partnership working to deliver effective engagement and change, notably the Aberdeen Climate Action Network delivered a useful conference in 2021 bringing together national and international stakeholders to discuss practical action. Community led initiatives could be part of community empowerment work (e.g. Community Food Growing Plans) and through schools and community learning and development services.

The IS supports activity through the Community Planning Improvement Board and support for community councils. We worked with the Sustainable Scotland Network to deliver a deep dive on climate change for the Community Planning Improvement Board and also delivered a session with the Community Planning Managers Network. This will shape our activity moving forward.

Role of the Scottish Government and its agencies

7. What is the Scottish Government doing to help the local government sector deliver on net zero goals? What, if anything, could it do more of to help the sector?

Local Government is committed to net zero goals but there must be coordination between the different policies and consultations, support for skills and long term resourcing.

There is a need to be clear on what local authorities can and must deliver, through their direct control and their influence. National policies and commitments could be streamlined, cross referenced and checked for potential conflicts in order to make the policy landscape more coherent, with a focus on pulling together different work streams rather than additional requirements. Delivering net zero and adapting to the impacts of climate change must be central to all policy design and interventions with national and local stakeholders working in partnership, using local knowledge and input which is invaluable. The partnership between COSLA and Scottish Government to deliver the 20% reduction in car miles demonstrates the potential benefits from engaging with Local Government.

Connected to this is the need to better understand and articulate the context of climate change – the co benefits of tackling net zero and the relationship between health, economy and climate change. This links into the work of the Just Transition Commission and would enable Local Government to design and implement better interventions and understand the connection between different policies.

To avoid duplication and ensure effective and timely delivery, the Scottish Government can work with existing structures such as the IS, COSLA, Adaptation Scotland and the Sustainable Scotland Network to enhance and provide tailored, practical support to Local Government. This needs to be coordinated and delivered in partnership. The recent leadership guidance and emerging Net Zero manual are important resources and councils need to be supported to access and engage. In particular, there is growing interest in designing and accessing training for officers and Elected Members such as Carbon Literacy. The Local Government elections present an opportunity to explore opportunities for national training. Councils need to be supported to deliver training in a sustainable and meaningful way.

Pulling together and coordinating data resources at national level can support place based approaches to climate change and for better decision making and understanding. The annual reporting provides a useful update but further analysis could be undertaken to shape support and areas for improvement moving forward.