

# ICE submission to the Public Accounts Committee on Achieving Net-Zero

January 2021

## Introduction

Established in 1818 and with over 95,000 members worldwide, the Institution of Civil Engineers exists to deliver insights on infrastructure for societal benefit, using the professional engineering knowledge of our global membership.

Our submission to this inquiry responds to the linked NAO report's findings, particularly Parts One and Two; we agree with all the recommendations in Part Three on delivering the net-zero strategy. ICE's extensive body of work and insight has informed this submission, including our 2020 State of the Nation Report.<sup>1</sup> We outline areas the Committee should explore in oral evidence with Ministers and officials. For more information, please contact:

**Chris Richards**, Director of Policy, [policy@ice.org.uk](mailto:policy@ice.org.uk)

## Part One: The scale of the challenge

ICE agrees with the NAO's findings. Before the 2050 net-zero target became law, the UK was already failing to meet the less ambitious target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 80% based on 1990 levels. Achieving net-zero will require a degree of realism about the scale of the challenge, not just the target, but also the required retooling of our infrastructure and broader economic system to support the transition.

Politically, there is a challenge: governments are less likely to invest political capital in something when they will not be around to claim the credit. To address this risk, the scale of the challenge needs to be recognised by the public so that current and future governments feel obligated to act and have an electoral reason to do so. Part Three of the NAO report outlined the requirement for public engagement, which ICE also recommended in our 2020 State of the Nation report.

We agree that getting the public to change behaviour should be the focus of future strategies for net-zero. The non-public facing elements of the transition (i.e. energy decarbonisation) have been achieved mainly behind the scenes, mostly coming into public contact through energy bills. As Table 1 shows, the areas where public behaviour changes can make a real difference are viewed mainly as difficult to do, despite there being ready solutions to make these actions a reality.

- A. The Committee should explore what policy is being developed by Departments to make actions perceived as difficult to do by the public, easier.

The narrative around the net-zero target also needs to change to garner greater public buy-in. At the moment, it is presented as a significant challenge which needs to be overcome regardless of the cost. However, there are other impacts over and above halting a rise in global warming that come as additional benefits. Net-zero infrastructure is cheaper to deliver and is cheaper for the consumer in the long-term. A net-zero economy also supports UK economic competitiveness through greater resource efficiency. The issue isn't a challenge but an opportunity to invest now for later.

---

<sup>1</sup> ICE (2020) [State of the Nation 2020: Infrastructure and the 2050 net-zero target](#)

- B. The Committee should explore if Departments, from their perspective, have clarity on a net-zero economy's wider benefits beyond climate change targets.

**Table 1: 10 things the public can do to support the transition to net-zero<sup>2</sup>**

Average annual reduction in CO2 emissions per person Tonnes of CO2 equivalent	Action to reduce emissions	Percentage of respondents* that said it would be easy or difficult to do the actions	
		Easy to do	Difficult to do
2.04	Live car-free	18%	68%
1.94	Shift to a battery electric car	24%	44%
1.68	Take one less long-haul flight per year	50%	12%
1.60	Purchase or produce your own renewable energy	17%	53%
0.98	Use public transport more	36%	42%
0.90	Refurbish/renovate your home to improve energy efficiency	25%	49%
0.80	Switch to a vegan diet	14%	67%
0.80	Install a heat pump	9%	42%
0.65	Use more energy-efficient cooking appliances/equipment	49%	25%
0.64	Shift to renewable-based heating	21%	43%

\* Note: the remaining percentages relate to 'not applicable' or 'don't know' responses

## Part Two: Coordination across government

We agree with the NAO report that achieving net-zero will require extensive coordination. Transformational change, of the necessary scale, will need coordination across government through pan-Departmental strategies and being baked into existing frameworks for decision making, such as the Green Book appraisal process.

The question that needs to be unpicked is whether or not to classify net-zero as a 'business as usual' policy theme and integrate it into everything (the collective responsibility approach). Alternatively, it could be seen as a single national challenge that requires centralised leadership (e.g. the Department for Energy and Climate Change drove transformation in energy).

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has responsibility for net-zero strategy; however, other departments have some responsibility for different aspects of the transition (e.g. the Department for Transport). The UK, therefore, has a mixed approach, based mainly on collective responsibility. However, collective responsibility also means no one is centrally accountable.

- C. The Committee should explore who is ultimately accountable in government for ensuring relevant policy aligns with the net-zero ambition.

The UK is not unique in needing to coordinate the challenge; lessons can be learned from countries in the vanguard such as Sweden, which is taking a programme management approach to Sweden's climate transition.<sup>3</sup> Notably, they have driven the creation of sector decarbonisation pathways with industry buy-in.

Coordination across government works better where there is clarity on outcomes, particularly when exploring how to exploit new technologies and solutions. An existing example is the cross-departmental Office for Zero Emission Vehicles.

<sup>2</sup> ICE (2020) [State of the Nation 2020: Infrastructure and the 2050 Net-Zero Target](#)

<sup>3</sup> ICE (2020) [A Plan for Transitioning Infrastructure to Net-Zero](#)

Its precursor, the Office for Low Emission Vehicles, was set up in 2009 to simplify policy development and delivery across Departments to drive low emission vehicle adoption.

Rather than focusing on taking policy decisions, Government should focus on setting stable policy frameworks within which decisions will be made. Without these frameworks, there will be frustration from industry and the public, particularly where policy decisions end up changing frequently. These frameworks should cover:

- The opportunities that exist and where to continue with what works, for example, Contracts for Difference auctions
- Ambitions for regulatory reform in line with the shifts to the 'playing field' that are needed
- Clarity on timescales to provide some consistency (e.g. how long programmes or subsidies will last, or when programmes will be reviewed and the criteria for doing so), and
- A sense of direction – the Carbon Budgets from the Committee on Climate Change provide some of this.

We agree that local authorities have a role to play, in particular with supporting behavioural change outlined in our response to Part One. Many of the solutions will be local, for example, nudging the public towards using public transport, or the planning system's role in ensuring infrastructure and housing can be catalysts for reducing environmental impacts.<sup>4</sup>

Other public bodies and arms-length bodies have a role. Many will not have yet linked net-zero and their day-to-day activities, particularly with the inertia inherent in the administration of the country.

Regulators also have a central role to play. Whereas social and environmental issues are dynamic and cross-sectoral, regulation currently tends to be rigid, sector-based and focused on relatively short-term cycles, with a primary duty to protect the interests of consumers. ICE's studies<sup>5</sup> have revealed a growing consensus that the defined regulatory periods governing utilities prevent strategic, long-term planning and delivery of some of the UK's core economic infrastructure networks.

- D. The Committee should explore whether public and arm-length bodies have or will be made to review their day-to-day activities and spending to check compatibility with the net-zero target. The Committee should also explore what plans exist for regulatory reform to bring regulation more in line with current national objectives and legal requirements.

---

<sup>4</sup> ICE (2019) [State of the Nation 2019: Connecting Infrastructure with Housing](#)

<sup>5</sup> ICE (2020) [Aligning Long-Term Government Policy and the Regulation of Utility Companies](#)