

Building support for the energy transition

By UK Youth Climate Coalition

The UK Youth Climate Coalition (UKYCC) is a network of young people focused on advocating for climate justice and ensuring youth voices, perspectives and lived experiences are included in the transition to net zero. This specific focus on youth perspectives informs our response to the call for evidence: though the points we make are often applicable to the general public, they acutely apply to young people.

Overall, we believe that young people are not properly informed, engaged with or equipped to understand and participate in the Government's progression towards net zero and the energy transition. While young people remain the age group most concerned about the climate crisis, and most supportive of climate positive action, young people are less likely to be aware of the term net zero and don't feel confident defining the term. Misinformation and a bias towards the negative costs of net zero, rather than the opportunities and benefits the transition can and will bring, mark the public's perception of the energy transition. For young people in particular, their perception of what future opportunities will be available to them has been negatively affected by rising personal costs and restricted opportunities. This creates fertile ground for disengagement, disenfranchisement and climate anxiety, all of which act as a barrier to support for the Government's programme of work. More proactive action is required from the Government and partners to foster trust and counter the narrative of harm that has come to be associated with the term net zero.

In response to Q1: *Has the Government properly explained the potential benefits of the energy transition to the average citizen?* and Q2: *Is there a clear understanding of the costs of the energy transition to householders and businesses?*

We believe there are significant misconceptions about both the costs and benefits of the energy transition. The costs are exaggerated (even weaponised) and the benefits underappreciated and poorly understood. Overall costs of the energy transition are perceived to be higher than they are, especially at a high cost to the individual. The Young Foundation reports that most people feel unprepared to transition their energy usage and believe that any action to do so would come at a personal cost (<https://www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/publications/uk-public-perceptions-and-readiness-for-a-just-transition-to-net-zero/>), despite the fact that government grants are available to help homeowners improve the energy efficiency of their homes. Research has shown that a lack of knowledge and personalised advice on the financial benefits of an energy efficient home are major barriers preventing homeowners from engaging in the energy transition (<http://citizensadvice.org.uk/policy/publications/demand-net-zero/>).

Young people are no exception to this rule: research has shown that young people believe that there will be long term financial benefits to the energy transition but costs will increase in the short term (<https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/news/costs-and-benefits-of-the-uk-reaching-net-zero-emissions-by-2050-the-evidence/>). Misunderstanding of short-term costs often centres around energy prices, a topic which has risen to the forefront of the political agenda in recent years. Previous research from DESNZ further confirms that all age groups, including young people, believe that energy prices will rise in the short term during the net zero transition, despite the fact that renewable energy is less expensive to produce than fossil fuels (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/desn-public-attitudes-tracker-summer-2024/desn-public-attitudes-tracker-net-zero-and-climate-change-summer-2024-uk>). This is a point of concern as young people are more vulnerable to experiencing fuel poverty than any other age group in the UK (<https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/fuel-poverty-by-age/>). Confusion regarding the cost of energy in the UK is compounded by a lack of energy literacy and understanding about the energy grid. This deficit in energy literacy is especially high in young people who are at an early stage of living independently. For

example, independent surveys have shown that most young people don't understand their energy bills (<https://www.utilitybidder.co.uk/blog/billing-awareness-and-misconceptions-report>). In a climate where anxiety regarding the cost of utilities is high, this knowledge gap threatens to seriously impact support for the energy transition. Moreover, it is not clear how (often young) people that don't own property and have less agency over their energy providers or energy efficiency of their home can positively contribute to or benefit from the energy transition; this risks the energy transition being viewed as an instrument to further their precarity, rather than a mechanism to address the cost of living crisis.

Another area in which there is a lack of understanding of and appreciation for the benefits offered by the energy transition amongst young people are the employment opportunities created by the energy transition. Employment and job security are pressing concerns facing the next generation, and young people want to work in green jobs; yet they are not being made aware of or given access to the opportunities available to them (https://green-alliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Closing_the_UKs_green_skills_gap.pdf). This breakdown of communication about green skills and career opportunities happens within the education system as well as outside of it: the King's Trust (2023) reports that young people not in education, employment or training have a lower awareness of green skills and believe green jobs are only eligible to people with degrees, rather than being vocational careers (<https://www.kingstrust.org.uk/about-us/news-views/green-skills-crisis-is-looming>). Not only does this misconception of employment opportunities offered by the energy transition disenfranchise young people from accessing high-quality employment, it will also exacerbate the green skills gap inhibiting a successful transition to net zero.

Taken together, this clearly demonstrates that there is a lack of awareness that the long-term benefits of the energy transition will outweigh any short-term costs, both at an individual and societal level.

In response to Q3: *Is there a need for public campaigns to counter the anti net zero narrative?*

The prevalence of such misunderstanding amongst the public should be of grave concern for the Government. Misconceptions such as these can equate net zero with a personal sense of injury and injustice, a facet capitalised on by anti-net zero campaigners who blame energy price rises on the net zero transition (<https://www.netzerowatch.com/all-news/cost-of-net-zero-grid-2030>). Such sentiments degrade support for the energy transition and could foster mistrust in the Government's programme of work. As the above answers explore, net zero is at best a term most people are unable to explain and at worst has become buzzword co-opted by some to exacerbate the political divide in the UK and spread misinformation. Research is also showing that in the UK attitudes towards net zero are shifting in every age group and more people believe that the news is exaggerating the threat of climate change (<https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/public-attitudes-to-net-zero-and-climate-change-are-evolving/>). Thus, there is an urgent need for public campaigns to counter the anti-net zero narrative before climate denial becomes entrenched in society.

Moreover, the transition to net zero can only be achieved with public support. Not least because the Government is relying on individuals to make changes to their everyday lives to meet the next carbon budgets, such as increasing the fuel efficiency of their homes (<http://citizensadvice.org.uk/policy/publications/demand-net-zero/>). The general public need to feel empowered to understand the term net zero and associate it with positive action for our shared future, rather than an additional and unnecessary perceived cost to the individual. It is important that campaigns to do so are public and come from the Government in order to rebuild trust from the public in their programme of work.

In response to Q4: *How should the Government be more positively engaging the public with this goal?*

The government should focus on improving general understanding of the energy transition, and associated terms and concepts such as net-zero. Education to improve energy literacy and opportunities to learn about and develop green skills should be provided to young people across the UK including those not in education, employment or training. Clearer employment opportunities, especially early career opportunities, should be developed for young people across a range of professions and routes.

The national roadmap to achieving net-zero targets should be made clearer. This would contextualise costs to householders/businesses within the wider context of industry and government action to prevent animosity and illustrate the vital role that individuals play in the energy transition. To facilitate individual engagement in the energy transition, the government should be more proactively promoting government schemes to help people and local communities transition to net zero, including personalised advice and grants for homeowners (<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/policy/publications/demand-net-zero/>) and private landlords (<https://www.centrica.com/media/c5nozt4b/british-gas-greening-the-prs-report.pdf>) to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

All communications to the public about the energy transition should focus on the long-term benefits of the energy transition, both to the individual and wider society. It should be emphasised that the effects of climate change will cost more than the cost of the energy transition, and delaying the transition only increases short-term costs. Campaigns should be clear and contain specific achievable actions for the public. Alongside this, the government should be proactive in countering misinformation from anti net-zero lobbyists.

Perhaps most importantly the government must show commitment to a just and fair energy transition taking systemic actions which have material benefit to people. This includes policies at a national and local level. For example, improving public transport connectivity or decoupling the price of gas and electricity, to enable individuals to make greener choices and reduce their carbon footprint. Any effective campaign should include a consultation with the electorate, but especially with young people, about the type of green policies they would like to see benefitting them. The government could work with existing stakeholder groups, for example the National Energy System Operator Societal Forums, to gain insight into how best to delivery meaningful policies changes that benefit different communities across the UK.