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Local authorities' ability to deliver net zero

The UK Net Zero Strategy (BEIS 2021) states on p.261 that “of all UK emissions, 82% are within the scope of influence of local authorities”. Two pages later, on p.263, it states that “government analysis suggests that over 30% of the emissions reductions needed... rely on local authority involvement to some degree”. Yet only 2-5% of local emissions are under their direct control. This begs the question ‘what role do local authorities play in the delivery of net zero?’

To answer it, a total of 12 voluntary local authority (LA) climate action plans (CAPs) across two UK combined authority areas, the West of England Combined Authority and the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, were coded deductively using NVivo regarding policy instruments mentioned in the pursuit of net zero. This analysis reveals that the national policy instruments supporting delivery of net zero at local authority level are i) grants and funds; ii) regulations, legislation, and standards; and to a lesser extent iii) public expenditure (Nolden et al. 2024; Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of references to national policy instruments in LA CAPs.

	Policy - LA
1 : Compliance markets (ETS)	0%
2 : Economic incentive (subsidy)	3%
3 : Funding scientific research	0%
4 : Government-backed loans	1%
5 : Grants and funds	40%
6 : Organisational change	2%
7 : Planning	5%
8 : Public expenditure (capital and revenue)	14%
9 : Public education and advertising	0%
10 : Public procurement	0%
11 : Regulations, legislation and standards	31%
12 : Regulated funding & levies	0%
13 : Strategy	4%

These three specific national policy instruments were subsequently matched with carbon reduction figures provided in the UK's Carbon Budget Delivery Plan (CBDP; DESNZ 2024 – Table 2 – indicating the number of CAPs they appeared in (LA CAP) and the assumed emission reductions (MtCO_{2e})).

Table 2. Frequency and emission reductions associated with national policy instruments mentioned in LA CAPs.

Grants and funds & Public expenditure (capital and revenue)	LA CAP	MtCO₂e
Active travel spending	2	1.2
Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme	4	6.9
Home Upgrade Grant	2	0.188
Green Home Grant Local Authority Delivery Scheme	3	1.3
Green Heat Network Fund/Heat Network Investment Project	1	5.8
Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund	3	0.1
		15.488

Regulations, legislation and standards	LA CAP	MtCO₂e
Future Homes Standard	3	2.6
Environmental bill/BNG	8	
PRS regulations (Minimum energy efficiency standards in the private rented sector)	7	7.5
End of sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles from 2035 onwards	3	32.9
EV charging points	1	
Resource and waste strategy	1	
		43.00

Findings suggest these policy instruments and the schemes within are expected to reduce emissions by around 58.5MtCO₂e. Compared to the 1,703MtCO₂e emissions all final user policies specified in the CBDP are expected to save plus the 956MtCO₂e associated with decarbonisation policies in the electricity supply industries, these figures suggest a direct LA involvement in around 3.4% of UK emission excluding electricity supply industries and 2.2% of UK emissions including the electricity supply industries. UK LAs' ability to deliver net zero is therefore confined to the 2-5% range of UK national emissions considered under direct control.

References

- BEIS (2021). Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener. Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. [net-zero-strategy-beis.pdf](#)
- DESNZ (2024). EEP – Annex D – Policy Savings. Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. [Annex_D_policy_saving_EEP2021_2040.ods](#)
- Nolden, C., Barnes, J., McMillan, E., McDermont, M. (2024). Translating national net zero policy into local implementation: A UK case study. *ECEEE Summer Study 2024 Proceedings*, 3-187-24.