

Devolution's potential for reaching net zero

Non-Verbatim Minutes



The Devolution
All-Party Parliamentary Group

Date	Tuesday 30 November 2021
Time	10:00 – 11:00
Venue	Virtual meeting conducted via Zoom.
Chair	Andrew Lewer MBE MP (@ALewerMBE) Member of Parliament for Northampton South, Chair of the Devolution APPG.
Speakers	Myles Allen Professor of Geosystem Science in the School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford and Head of the Climate Dynamics Group in the University's Department of Physics. Polly Billington (@PollyBillington) Chief Executive of UK100, a network of local leaders, committed to clean energy, clean air and climate action. Philip Glanville (@philipglanville) Directly elected Mayor of Hackney and a member of the Local Government Association's Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board.

MINUTES

The Chair, **Andrew Lewer MP**, welcomed the meeting attendees and speakers.

He discussed the forthcoming Levelling Up White Paper and explained that the Group intends to hold an inquiry on the paper in the new year. He notified the Group that, when the paper is released, a call for evidence will be sent out and the parameters for the inquiry set without a further meeting, so the Group can move quickly to establish the inquiry.

He then introduced **Polly Billington**, Chief Executive of UK100, to give an overview of different local authorities, the their work to achieve net zero in their local areas, and share best practice.

POLLY BILLINGTON, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF UK100

Polly outlined how local Government is very ambitious and willing to deliver the net zero agenda, and stressed the importance of the Government working with local Government and the need for the Government to provide milestones and how they see local government fitting into the equation. She talked about innovative local Councils like Cambridgeshire who are supporting community energy generation, but the rules are currently restricting councils meaning things that should be routine are seen as innovative.

Polly noted that net zero is vital to achieve devolution and to level up the country by supporting jobs and innovation through local authorities. She noted that while more resources are needed, but it's vital that the delivery of net zero isn't solely because of taxpayer investment. She said that it's vital that the UK Infrastructure Bank has a net zero mandate which allows local authorities to access private finance.

Finally, she noted again that we will not see growth in jobs and skills, as well as devolution and decentralisation, unless it's achieved through the frame of net zero.

PROFESSOR MYLES ALLEN, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Before Myles' contribution, Andrew Lewer handed the Chair to Ludovico Orlando, from the APPG Secretariat.

Myles agreed with Polly that net zero will not be delivered on the back of the taxpayer and said that he didn't understand why the country has such enthusiasm for addressing the climate crisis through public funding.

He noted that there is potential for the climate agenda to become a major societal division and become a wedge issue unless climate policy is well-formed; again because of the presumption that it is an issue for the Government to fix.

Academically, he noted two broad sides to the climate agenda. Net zero, and the other elephant in the room for countries and local authorities – the need for adaptation. He noted that the weather is already changing, and we should expect major changes in the weather over the next decades. Good political agreement on what we need to do is required, as well as resources, but that we can all agree on what we're trying to do. He noted that 're lucky in Britain as we're not facing such severe impacts as other countries.

He believes the potentially divisive issue is net zero, which is important to the meeting because decisions made at the local level have the power to determine how divisive it is. He said local decision-making is key to avoiding this divide.

He presented the challenge of getting to net zero as supply vs demand, that is producing CO₂ against the demand for services that create CO₂. He believes we will get to net zero by reducing demand for services that produce CO₂, which is not about government telling people not to do things. He noted that decisions made by local authorities affect our day-to-day lives, for example how people get to work or heat their homes. He questioned the extent to which local authorities are thinking of the problem within the framework of reducing demand and how their decisions can affect that.

Myles's personal impression is the government is pressing the issue of net zero but is not engaging with the biggest generators of CO₂ – the fossil fuel companies. He offered two scenarios where local authorities can play a role in this debate.

Planning decisions relating to new fossil fuel supply – whether extraction within the UK or supply in terms of imports through ports and pipelines. He noted that local authorities have the power to raise the questions about where the CO₂ that is being produced is going.

He believes that, at the moment, we regard bringing fossil carbon into the UK as an innocent activity, whereas releasing it is the source of climate change. He noted that fossil carbon comes in through a small number of intakes, that is pipes and ports. He believes we don't talk about controlling the problem at that point.

He believes it is possible to decarbonise in 20 years the fossils coming into the UK, by disposing of the same amount of CO₂ generated, for example by re-injecting it under the ground.

Second, on procurement. He noted that local authorities are still substantial purchasers of fossil fuels. He suggested empowering purchasing officers to ask companies what they're doing to reduce emissions. He noted that Oxford Net Zero can support planning officers to do this.

Myles believes we can't afford to solve the climate problem with public money, but that we have to rely on private funding. He believes the oil and gas industry can afford it, and that they should be spending their money on solving the problem by getting rid of the CO₂ generated. He said local authorities could start raising this issue when considering planning applications.

PHILIP GLANVILLE, MAYOR OF HACKNEY

Philip noted that while he is speaking as a member of the Local Government Association's Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board, much of the work he does crosses this arena and as such he would call on the full range of his experience when speaking.

He noted the local Government Association's local path to net zero and their attendance at COP26 which, working with local government around the world, secured a mention for the role of local government in the final agreement. He stressed the importance of continuing the work of COP26 now the conference has finished and the key role local government can play in that.

He asked how we embed net zero in the UK and suggested leveraging it to achieve more investment and funding for local government. He questioned how local authorities can access green and blended finance.

He noted that councils are often more ambitious than national government, with towns, cities and regions having clear records of delivery. He noted that the National Audit Office has already said two thirds of councils are aiming to be net zero twenty years ahead of the national target, and that most local authorities have a net zero commitment.

He noted that councils could influence 82% of emissions, and that despite the pressures of the pandemic local authorities have continued this agenda, for example by expanding active travel and increasing electric vehicle infrastructure.

He noted the importance of partnership between all levels of government, which can be very successful. For example, in Hackney, they were able to go out to the market with ambitious plans which will lead to 3,000 electric vehicle charging points by 2030. He stressed the importance of going to the market with big numbers to ferment long-term partnership and innovation.

He pointed out, however, that this requires stable regulatory environment. He cited frustrations with government programmes and was critical of the Green Homes Grant Scheme, as London Councils have been. He suggested blended finance solutions would be a more sustainable way of achieving these goals in future, which would lead to a jobs dividend and local supply change.

On the case for devolution, he noted that we have already seen local authorities deliver results. He said that how national government approaches local government can be disparate and confusing, limiting the scope for change and improvement. He said that engagement with multiple government departments can be confusing and there needs to be better streamlining of this. He noted that it is great that there's a net zero forum but asked what that practically means for local authorities as it needs to function as a true partnership, not just a talking shop.

He discussed a national devolution baseline for England, including new powers. He joined Myles in stressing the need for blended finance, and for Councils to more easily be able to access finance.

Q&A

Ludo (Secretariat) asked what practicality means in practice, and how the UK can use its year with the Presidency of COP26 to ensure the promises become tangible actions.

Polly noted that the commitment to local government was in the final text but wasn't in the text for the whole two weeks. She urged everybody who believes in the power of local government to stay vigilant and ensure it doesn't fall off the agenda. She welcomed existence of the net zero forum and also said there should be a local government delivery board. She stressed this couldn't be a talking shop but should be cross party, involve ministers and result in changes to policy that are required.

She noted that so many departments have the capacity to achieve net zero, for example on procurement such as the NHS leaking out heat, even though fixing that problem would save money, and the NHS has a long-term interest in reducing the effects of climate change.

She noted that DLUHC, which has lost local government from its title, needs to be thinking about the powers it's talking about and how it's going to establish a settlement for local government to deliver. She stressed the importance of local deals – for example, Cornwall was the only non-metropolitan region that secured energy in its devolution deal and is now a net generator of electricity and power. She noted that despite this they are unable to export power due to restrictions from the grid, and asked how the government could change to better facilitate schemes like this.

Philip agreed with Polly. He noted the importance of a joined-up approach. He noted that local government must be given the right financial levers to fully take advantage of their local knowledge and situations, and the Government must be willing to work with local government productively.

Ludo asked how, through academic research, we can make politicians aware of the need to adapt, and how to we apply that to policy?

Myles said local authorities are doing well, and resources must be aligned with agendas. HE noted the potential unfairness of the burden of climate change on different areas, and that rural areas would be affected more heavily. He pointed to a number of decisions that are due to be made that could be influenced by the UK's presidency, for example the Cambo oil field and the potential knock on effects that could have if it is approved while the UK holds the presidency.

Polly noted that the effects of climate change don't just fall on different areas, but on different people, for example those with poor insulation, which would tend to be the less well off, or those who struggle to get insurance because of increased flood risks. She noted the Countryside Climate Network which looks at mitigation. She pointed out that we can already see the effects; the Thames Barrier, originally intended to be used a couple of times a year, is now used far more often.

Philip noted that the LGA represents all parts of the UK. He stressed the importance of a local focus in all areas, noting that in Hackney most people rent instead of own which reduces their options for retrofitting more environmentally friendly solutions to their homes. He stressed the need to invest in the right energy solutions, reduce fuel poverty and energy waste, otherwise people will experience the worst aspects of extreme weather and won't be able to heat their homes.

Myles raised the issue of food, which he said the Environment Bill did not engage with. He talked about the challenges of making the food chain net zero compatible. On Cambo, he said that it was a good example of a local council holding the fossil fuel producers to account to fix the issues caused by their products.

Philip discussed food waste and the contribution of that to climate change, which is something which is very much in our control. He discussed the importance of local food networks to reduce waste, and empowering local authorities to make these changes.

Finally, Polly discussed combining funding for schemes like retrofit with innovation to find ways to draw in other sources of income, build more capacity in local authorities and engage more constructively with the private sector. She gave an example of central government funding to decarbonise bus fleets in Oxford in Coventry; while this is good for those towns, it doesn't benefit the country more widely by funding innovation or development.

The meeting closed at 11:00am.

APPENDIX – LINKS SHARED IN CHAT

Item	Shared by
A special message from Prof Myles Allen to the school strikers at COP26 - Net Zero Climate	Myles Allen
COP26: a letter to school strikers from 'the physicist behind net zero' (theconversation.com)	Myles Allen
Report highlights huge opportunity for London's food systems to become less carbon intensive - ReLondon	Philip Glanville
UK100 Publications UKIB case studies UK100	Polly Billington
Accelerating the Rate of Investment in Local Energy Projects UK100	Polly Billington

The powers local authorities need to deliver on climate UK100	Polly Billington
Carbon Takeback – Stopping fossil fuels from causing global warming	Myles Allen
The integration of policy-making in national and local government to achieve net zero carbon emissions - House of Lords- 21 April 2021 Local Government Association	Philip Glanville
Green Economic Recovery in Lewes District Council Local Government Association	Cllr Emily O'Brien, Lewes District Council
UK Cities Climate Investment Commission Report (catapult.org.uk)	Philip Glanville