



Innovate
UK

Creating Better Places

Ten areas where local innovation can improve lives and unlock growth



Delivered by Urban Foresight for Innovate UK's Net Zero Living Programme.

Grounded in insights from the local authorities who participated in Innovate UK's Net Zero Living Programme



Ten areas where local innovation can improve lives and unlock growth

Insights from Innovate UK's Net Zero Living Programme revealed 10 areas where doing things differently could improve local services and open markets for economic growth.

Building blocks for achieving net zero

01 Putting people at the centre of place-based change

02 Embedding net zero as an enabler of better services

03 Building local authority capacity

Managing system change

04 Governance to navigate political and institutional change

05 Enabling partnerships for place-based innovation

06 Regional collaboration to scale climate action

07 Digital platforms for collaboration

08 Building investable pipelines

09 Strengthening the supply chain and workforce

Scaling up

10 Models, approaches and tools ready for real-world scale

Enabling conditions

- Framing and narrative
- Legitimacy and mandate
- Internal capacity and confidence
- Coherent governance
- Trusted partnerships
- Clarity of purpose and shared outcomes
- Learning and adaptability
- Flexible, long-term funding



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Introduction



About this handbook

This handbook forms part of the *Creating Better Places: Ten areas where local innovation can improve lives and unlock growth* series.

Through its Net Zero Living Programme, Innovate UK provided funding, insights, and specialist support to local authorities so they could adopt social, cultural, policy, and technical innovation to help their place prosper.

Produced by Urban Foresight for Innovate UK, this handbook provides an overview of where participating local authorities and their project partners have done things differently in ten familiar areas of local delivery so that decarbonisation enables better outcomes for people, services and local economies.

It is complemented by a set of ten resource packs, one for each area where there are opportunities for local innovation to improve lives and unlock growth. Each pack brings together insights from places taking part in the Net Zero Living Programme, key concepts, practical tried-and-tested steps for local authorities and their partners to take, and further resources.

This series of publications is designed to help places avoid duplication, speed up delivery, and achieve better outcomes more efficiently and effectively.

Why this matters

This handbook is built on a simple premise: climate action is not a separate agenda. When embedded well, it is a powerful lever to improve everyday outcomes for residents and support place-based renewal and resilient economic growth.

Across the Net Zero Living Programme, local authorities demonstrated that the main barriers to progress are rarely a lack of ambition or technology. Much of the technology needed already exists. The challenge lies in the non-technological barriers, such as adopting new technology and ways of working, coordination and behaviours, and capability and skills that make solutions work in real local contexts.

Places across the UK that made progress focused on overcoming non-technological barriers from fragmented governance, weak mandate and misaligned incentives to limited internal capacity and unclear routes to delivery. This handbook distils these lessons into practical approaches to ten key areas for delivery that other places can apply.

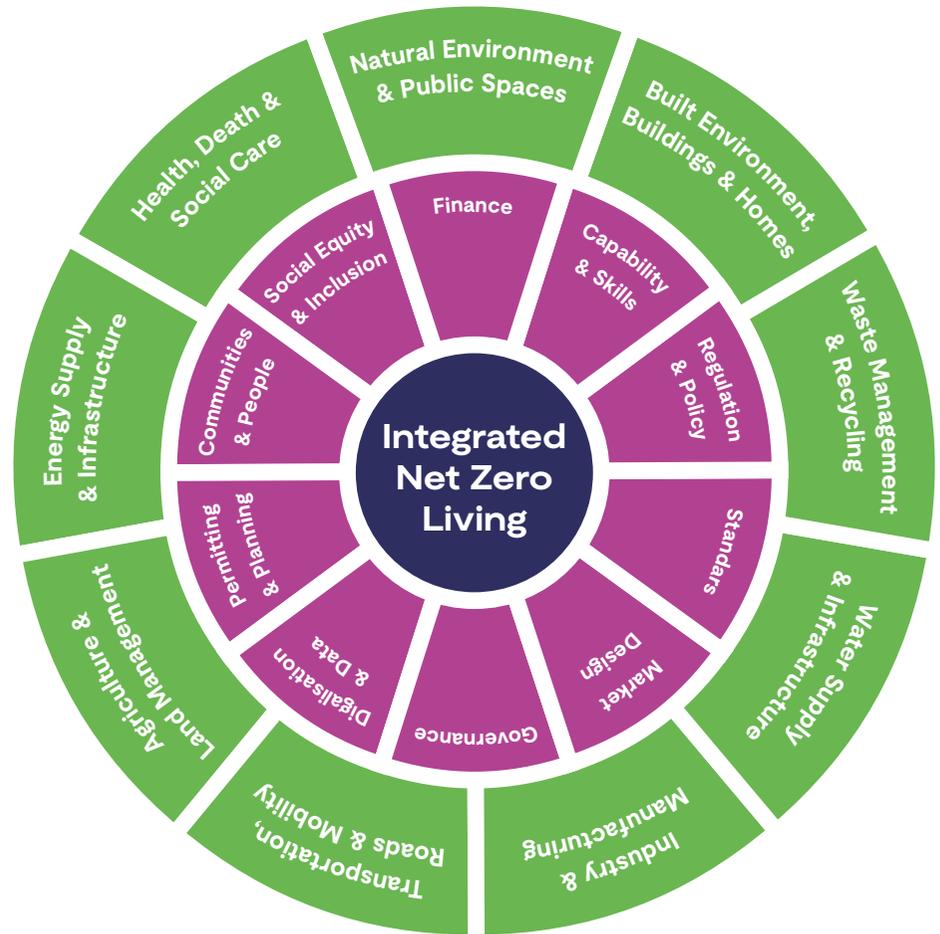


Figure 1: Net Zero Living complex web of non-technological barriers - Innovate UK

How to use this handbook

This handbook and the associated ten resource packs are designed to be dipped into when needed. You don't need to read them from start to finish.

Instead, go straight to the sections most relevant to your role, challenge, or stage of delivery to:

→ **Orient yourself**

Understand how others approached specific issues and what made progress easier.

→ **Align colleagues and partners**

Use practical tools in team meetings, workshops, or strategy sessions to create shared understanding and momentum.

→ **Support delivery**

Use the practical steps and tools to shape actions, test readiness, inform business cases and governance conversations, and scale implementation and the resulting impact for local people, services and suppliers.

→ **Avoid starting from scratch**

Use the examples and resources to build on what already exists locally and nationally.

The ten areas where there are opportunities to innovate are interconnected, but you don't need to work through them in a set order. Progress in one area often unlocks progress in others. You're encouraged to move between the resource packs that are most relevant to your changing needs as your work evolves.

Each section of this handbook can be read on its own and includes signposts to other closely related sections and resource packs. This allows you to move quickly between strategic context and practical approaches.

Some readers may focus on governance, leadership and system roles. Others may be looking for practical methods, tools or examples from places. Both are included.

Use it to:

- Map your system: What's working well? Where are the gaps?
- Spot levers: Where could a small shift unlock bigger benefits?
- Align partners: Create shared goals and clearer roles.
- Shape strategy: Design programmes that enable delivery at scale.

Getting to net zero is not about delivering more standalone climate projects. It is about embedding sustainable innovation into how your place plans, delivers and invests.

How this guide is structured

This handbook presents ten familiar areas where local authorities did things differently to overcome non-technological barriers to delivery. Each of these opportunities to innovate is explored in more depth through a dedicated resource pack.

Each resource pack follows a consistent structure so you can quickly find what you need.

Resource pack structure



The opportunity

Understand why it's worth taking a new approach to improve this area of local delivery.



Insights from places on the Net Zero Living Programme

Learn how local authorities participating in the Net Zero Living Programme overcame barriers by doing things differently.



Key concepts

Short explanations of helpful ideas.



Practical steps

Actions, prompts and checklists.



Tools and resources

Tried and tested tools and approaches used by places on the Programme.



Further reading

Recommended reading for those who want more.

Who this is for

This handbook is designed for people working in or alongside UK local authorities who are shaping better local outcomes by delivering projects that could support net zero, including:

- Officers working in regeneration, housing, infrastructure, economic development, or sustainability.
- Colleagues in finance, planning, procurement, and governance.
- Partners from business, community organisations, and delivery bodies.

It is written for people making real decisions in real places, often under pressure, with limited time and resources.



The role of the local authority



The role of the local authority

Local authorities sit at a unique intersection of democratic mandate, organisational governance, trusted partnerships, and market shaping. This gives them a distinct role in turning net zero ambitions into delivery.

1. Provide democratic legitimacy

Support for climate action accelerates when people understand how it can help deliver other benefits such as warmer homes, lower bills, better services and safer streets. Local authorities are in strong position to build this mandate.

2. Align internal governance

Only local authorities can join up finance, procurement, planning, estates, housing, legal, and direct service delivery.

3. Convene trusted partnerships

Local authorities bring neutrality and accountability, essential for cross-sector collaboration.

4. Shape long-term market conditions

Investment confidence depends on visible pipelines, structured delivery models, and clear asks from the public sector to the market. Local authorities can help create that clarity through how they structure projects and programmes.



Local authorities as system actors

Local authorities don't just provide individual services. They also help shape how the whole local system works.

Across local authorities which participated in Innovate UK's Net Zero Living Programme, the following roles were repeatedly seen as important for using decarbonisation to improve places for local people and businesses.

1. System convenor

Local authorities bring together the people and organisations which need to work together across a place: businesses, communities, anchor institutions, utilities, funders and investors.

Why: Many net zero solutions sit outside the council. Local authorities provide the legitimacy to convene local actors and create alignment.

2. Steward

Local authorities hold the long-term interests of a place. They provide continuity across political cycles, funding programmes, and organisational change, ensuring that ambition is protected and progress is sustained over time.

Why: Net zero delivery requires long-term commitment. Stewardship helps maintain focus, manage trade-offs and embed learning, even as leadership, priorities and structures change.

3. Trusted broker

Local authorities act as neutral and accountable intermediaries between partners with different incentives, risks, and timescales for improvement. They create the conditions for trust, manage tensions, and enable collaboration where relationships or confidence are weak.

Why: Complex partnerships rely on trust. Local authorities reduce risk, increase transparency, and help partners work together effectively.

4. Place-maker and market-shaper

Local authorities understand what their place needs. They influence investment, shape markets, set expectations, and build confidence.

Why: Local authorities don't deliver everything, but they set the conditions for delivery. Their choices shape how markets respond and where investment flows.

5. Delivery enabler

Local authorities shape the internal conditions for delivery through governance, processes, skills, data, and systems. They reduce friction, clarify roles, and build the capability needed to turn plans into action.

Why: Internal barriers such as silos, unclear ownership, and gaps in the skills and systems needed to deliver often slow progress more than a lack of ambition or technology.



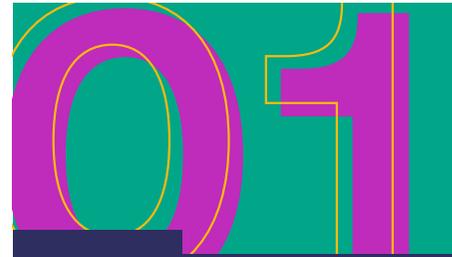
Mapping local authority roles to opportunities

Area with opportunities for local innovation	Local authority role	Why this role matters
01 Putting people at the centre of place-based change	Trusted broker, place-maker	Secures the mandate with citizens; builds legitimacy, fairness, inclusion
02 Embedding net zero as an enabler of better services	Place-maker	Secures mandate strategically, connects climate to daily life outcomes
03 Building local authority capacity	Delivery enabler	Builds the delivery muscle needed to deliver
04 Governance to navigate political and institutional change	System convenor, steward.	Maintains continuity, navigates change and volatility
05 Enabling partnerships for place-based innovation	System convenor, trusted broker	Convenes and aligns diverse partners around shared goals
06 Regional collaboration to scale climate action	System convenor, steward, place-maker	Unlocks scale and pooled capability
07 Digital platforms for collaboration	System convenor, steward, delivery enabler	Supports decisions, coordination, and visibility
08 Building investable pipelines	Trusted broker, place-maker	Secures the mandate with citizens; builds legitimacy, fairness, inclusion.
09 Strengthening the supply chain and workforce	Place-maker, trusted broker, market-shaper	Aligns skills with future demand
10 Models, approaches and tools ready for real-world scale	System convenor, steward	Brings all roles together in real-world tests, showing how net zero delivery models work for people, services and local economies.

Ten areas where local innovation can improve lives and unlock growth



These are familiar areas of local delivery, where places taking part in the Net Zero Living Programme have found opportunities to do things differently, so that decarbonisation enables better outcomes for people, services and local economies.



Putting people at the centre of place-based change



Embedding net zero as an enabler of better services



Building local authority capacity



Governance to navigate political and institutional change



Enabling partnerships for place-based innovation



Regional collaboration to scale climate action



Digital platforms for collaboration



Building investable pipelines



Strengthening the supply chain and workforce



Models, approaches and tools ready for real-world scale

01 Putting people at the centre of place-based change

Community engagement done well builds legitimacy, unlocks new ideas and strengthens delivery.

It helps local authorities move beyond one-off consultations to lasting relationships that reflect real life and real concerns. This opens the door to decisions that are more grounded, more inclusive and more likely to succeed.

It also gives businesses and investors greater confidence to act by increasing local demand for new services, reducing the risk of delays or disputes, and improving delivery so it is smoother, faster and more cost-effective.

Places on the Net Zero Living Programme are shifting from simply informing to actively empowering people.

They are doing this in three key ways:

- **Structured engagement.**
For example: How Calderdale Council's first Citizens' Jury helped shape its retrofit strategy.
- **Reaching people in familiar spaces and through trusted voices.**
For example: How Caerphilly County Borough Council used informal engagement to shape a whole-system net zero toolkit.
- **Embedding fairness from the start so changes are affordable, accessible and widely supported.**
For example: How Gwynedd Council is tackling fuel poverty through community-owned heat and power.



Related content

02 Embedding net zero as an enabler of better services

05 Enabling partnerships for place-based innovation

Key concepts

- Citizen engagement
- Legitimacy
- Just transition
- Inclusive participation
- Co-design

Main takeaways

- Engagement provides legitimacy and must be shaped around what matters locally
- Co-design builds ownership
- Informal and creative methods work well
- Trusted relationships help remove barriers
- Centring people avoids inequality and resistance

Local authority role

- Trusted broker
- Place-maker

02 Net zero as an enabler of better services

When net zero is embedded in everyday planning and delivery, it strengthens core local services instead of being seen as a competing priority.

It helps local authorities address familiar pressures, from rising costs and fuel poverty to economic resilience and public health, while creating long-term value for communities. Framed this way, climate action offers a practical route to better outcomes, stronger places and smarter use of public resources.

Through the Net Zero Living Programme, local authorities are reframing net zero from a standalone environmental goal to an enabler of what they already exist to do. Rather than treating climate as an add-on, they are identifying opportunities where it enables delivery against existing strategic priorities, creating clearer alignment and stronger mandates for delivery.

They are doing this by:

- **Aligning to local authority strategic priorities.**
For example: How Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council created economic development, job creation and democratic renewal through net zero.
- **Framing net zero as the how and not the why.**
For example: How Cardiff Council explored housing retrofit's social outcomes to drive council-wide engagement.
- **Unlocking wider benefits from net zero.**
For example: How Wakefield Council rewired strategy, planning, and investment, to make net zero a shared responsibility.



Related content

- 04** Governance to navigate political and institutional change →

Key concepts

- Outcome focused language
- Net zero as an enabler
- Everyday priorities
- Legitimacy and mandate
- Strategic alignment

Main takeaways

- Making the economic and social value clear strengthens leadership confidence and investor interest
- Plain outcome focused language that connects to everyday priorities matters
- Align to strategic objectives to build mandate and legitimacy

Local authority role

- Place-maker

03 Building local authority capacity

Strong capacity is a powerful accelerator of delivery.

When local authorities and other organisations have the right mix of skills, systems and confidence, they can move faster, work across silos and turn plans into action. Capacity building done well reduces reliance on short-term consultants, strengthens internal ownership and creates resilience to future shocks or policy change.

Participants in the Net Zero Living Programme are moving from treating capacity as individual skills gaps to building delivery capability across the organisation.

They are doing this in three key ways:

- **Developing shared understanding and confidence.**
For example: How Forest of Dean evolved carbon literacy into coordinated organisational action.
- **Embedding learning into everyday roles.**
For example: How Warrington built an organisational learning culture across services.
- **Strengthening internal systems and processes.**
For example: How Portsmouth developed governance, skills and delivery systems to make net zero part of core business.



Related content

- 04** Governance to navigate political and institutional change
- 07** Digital platforms for collaboration

Key concepts

- Organisational learning
- Cross-functional capability
- Delivery systems
- Confidence
- Ownership

Main takeaways

- Capacity is about systems as well as skills
- Learning must translate into action
- Cross-council alignment accelerates delivery

Local authority role

- Delivery enabler

04 Governance to navigate political and institutional change

Political and institutional change is a normal part of how local government works.

Elections bring new leaders and priorities, restructures reshape organisations, and budget cycles set the pace and focus of activity. These shifts can disrupt delivery, dilute focus or stall progress, but when handled well they also create chances to reset priorities, strengthen governance and build on what works.

Handled strategically, change can increase resilience rather than undermine it. Clear governance, shared evidence and embedded ownership help local authorities maintain momentum, protect long-term ambition and reduce reliance on individual champions. This also builds confidence internally and externally by making priorities clearer and delivery more robust.

In the Net Zero Living Programme, participating local authorities are shifting from reacting to change to designing for continuity.

They are doing this in three key ways:

- **Embedding net zero through local government reorganisation.**
For example : How Westmorland and Furness Council used the transition to unitary status to place climate action at the heart of a new local authority.
- **Shared frameworks that create stability in a changing political and institutional landscape.**
For example: How Peterborough City Council and Southampton City Council used shared data platforms and evidence that provided continuity through change
- **Hardwiring climate into financial and institutional systems.**
For example: How Manchester City Council embedded climate finance, governance and accountability to maintain momentum beyond individual teams or political cycles.



Related content

- 01** Putting people at the centre of place-based change
- 03** Building local authority capacity
- 08** Building investable pipelines

Key concepts

- Governance continuity → Financial governance
- Institutional resilience → Systems thinking
- Shared evidence

Main takeaways

- Change can be an opportunity
- Resilient governance helps maintain focus and priorities
- Simple shared tools protect momentum
- Resilient systems matter more than individual champions

Local authority role

- System convenor → Steward

05 Enabling partnerships for place-based innovation

Strong collaborations are essential for delivering change at pace and scale.

When local authorities use their convening power well, partnerships unlock skills, capacity and investment that no single organisation can deliver alone. They help align public leadership with business expertise, community insight and delivery capability, creating shared ownership of outcomes and reducing delivery risk.

Well-designed partnerships also give businesses and investors greater confidence to act by providing clarity of purpose, clear governance and visible routes to delivery.

With support from the Net Zero Living Programme, local authorities are shifting from ad hoc engagement to treating partnership as a core delivery mechanism.

They are doing this in three key ways:

- **Creating structured matchmaking between partners.**
For example: How Oxford City Council paired local organisations with funders to unlock place-based delivery.
- **Building sustained, place-based business ecosystems.**
For example: How Lambeth Climate Partnership brought businesses together around shared goals and ongoing collaboration.
- **Linking partnerships directly to real-world pilots.**
For example: How Westmorland and Furness Council moved from research to delivery by working with local businesses on low-carbon food systems.



View full resource pack →

Related content

06 Regional collaboration to scale climate action

07 Digital platforms for collaboration

Key concepts

- Convening power
- Co-design
- Trusted partnerships
- Shared purpose
- Matchmaking

Main takeaways

- Partnerships work best when they are intentional and structured
- Local authorities play a critical convening role
- Trust and clarity reduce delivery risk
- Linking partnership to tangible delivery builds confidence and momentum

Local authority role

- System convener
- Trusted broker

06 Regional collaboration to scale climate action

Regional collaboration helps local authorities do things together that they can't achieve on their own.

By working across boundaries, they can pool expertise, align priorities and build the critical mass needed for major infrastructure, skills and investment programmes. Done well, collaboration reduces duplication, increases market confidence and tackles challenges that no single authority can address alone.

Net Zero Living Programme places are formalising collaboration in new ways. They are creating shared frameworks, governance models and collective approaches that clarify roles, distribute responsibility and turn regional ambition into investable, deliverable action.

Across the Net Zero Living Programme, places are exploring purposeful regional collaboration in three key ways:

- **Creating shared regional frameworks and targets.**
For example: How Cambridgeshire's Locally Determined Contribution approach aligned climate ambition and action across local authorities.
- **Building regional partnerships to unlock investment and influence.**
For example: How Runnymede Borough Council developed regional partnerships to pioneer new models of local climate finance.
- **Formalising collaboration through regional governance structures.**
For example: How Derry City and Strabane District Council structured collaboration through a Climate Commission to support long-term delivery.



Related content

05 Enabling partnerships for place-based innovation

07 Digital platforms for collaboration

08 Building investable pipelines

09 Strengthening the supply chain and workforce

Key concepts

- Regional collaboration → Joint governance
- Shared frameworks → Scale
- Pooled capability

Main takeaways

- Collaboration reduces duplication and risk
- Formal collaboration mechanisms help maintain focus
- Shared frameworks enable scale
- Regional working strengthens delivery confidence

Local authority role

- System convenor → Steward → Place-maker

07 Digital platforms for collaboration

Used well, data and digital platforms can help local authorities do more than monitor progress.

They can support clearer priorities, stronger coordination with partners and better decisions across complex place-based systems.

Experience from the Net Zero Living Programme shows that local authorities are going from being data-led to being data-informed.

Rather than treating data as a technical exercise or reporting requirement, they are using digital tools to enable collaboration, decision-making and delivery in three key ways:

→ **Making the ecosystem visible through shared outcomes.** For example: How South Downs National Park Authority convened a whole ecosystem climate strategy with no statutory net zero powers.

→ **Using data to support real-world decisions.** For example: How Peterborough City Council and edenseven, a sustainability data consultancy firm, developed a modular platform to turn strategy into delivery.

→ **Building on what already exists.** For example: How the London Borough of Newham and Warrington Borough Council made informed sustainable procurement decisions using owned and freely available datasets.

This reflects a shift in mindset. The challenge is rarely a lack of data, but a lack of structure, coherence and relevance to the decisions local authorities need to make. When digital platforms are designed around how local authorities work in practice, they turn information into insight and insight into coordinated, place-based delivery.



Related content

03 Building local authority capacity

06 Regional collaboration to scale climate action

Key concepts

- The programme gained insights into the purpose and people of data platforms and tools, the learning suggests local authorities should favour tools and platforms that enable strategic alignment
- Interoperability and focus on data literacy, analytical capacity and prioritise information flow

Main takeaways

- The most effective tools help teams understand complexity, break silos and see other tangible benefits
- Digital platforms need to support conversation and action rather than simply measure carbon

Local authority role

- System convenor
- Steward
- Delivery enabler

08 Building investable pipelines

Investable pipelines turn ambition into delivery.

When local authorities develop clear, prioritised pipelines of projects, they build confidence among funders, partners and communities, making it easier to unlock capital and move at pace. Strong pipelines also help by focusing limited capacity on the projects that matter most.

Well-developed pipelines reduce delivery risk by clarifying governance, roles and routes to investment, and by making future demand visible to markets and delivery partners.

Net Zero Living Programme participants are moving from long lists of aspirations to structured, investable pipelines.

They are doing this in three key ways:

- **De-risking projects early through feasibility and governance.**
For example: How Belfast City Council prepared net zero infrastructure projects to attract investment.
- **Connecting community priorities to investable propositions.**
For example: How Bristol City Council explored ways to bridge community-led planning with investable pipelines.
- **Strengthening resilience through early financial testing.**
For example: How Surrey County Council stress-tested its green finance model ahead of local government reorganisation.



Related content

- 02** Embedding net zero as an enabler of better services
- 04** Governance to navigate political and institutional change
- 06** Regional collaboration to scale climate action

Key concepts

- Investable pipelines
- Mandate
- Feasibility
- Governance
- Regional portfolios
- Investor readiness

Main takeaways

- An investable pipeline is different from a strategic plan
- Mandate and approval must come before investor engagement
- Early technical, commercial and governance work reduces risk
- Linking pipelines to regional portfolios and citizen-led priorities strengthens credibility
- Visible, well-prepared pipelines build confidence with funders, partners and markets

Local authority role

- System convenor
- Place-maker
- Market-shaper

09 Strengthening the supply chain and workforce

A capable supply chain and skilled workforce are essential to turning plans into reality.

When skills, training and business capacity are aligned with real delivery demand, local authorities can accelerate progress, support local jobs and strengthen economic resilience. Done well, this reduces delays, increases quality and makes delivery more reliable.

Clear signals about future demand also give businesses and training providers greater confidence to invest, helping markets develop in step with local ambitions rather than lagging behind them.

Rather than generic skills strategies, places on the Net Zero Living Programme are adopting demand-led workforce and supply-chain planning.

They are doing this in two key ways:

→ Building retrofit delivery by investing in local skills.

For example: How Perth and Kinross Council turned a supply chain gap into a catalyst for workforce development.

→ Targeted skills development across the ecosystem.

For example: How Newham Council combined internal capacity-building with targeted external skills activity to support future delivery.



Related content

05 Building local authority capacity

06 Regional collaboration to scale climate action

Key concepts

- Demand-led skills
- Market confidence
- Supply chain mapping
- Coordination
- Workforce alignment

Main takeaways

- Skills planning works best when linked to real delivery pipelines
- Clear demand signals build market confidence
- Coordination matters more than isolated interventions
- Aligning supply chains to place-based priorities accelerates delivery

Local authority role

- Place-maker
- Market-shaper
- Trusted broker

10 Models, approaches and tools ready for real-world scale

The Climate Change Committee and other UK bodies* have repeatedly pointed to a delivery gap: the UK's challenge on net zero is not ambition or technology, but delivery.

Persistent gaps between targets and implementation are driven by non-technical constraints: capacity, governance, finance, procurement and coordination, particularly at local level.

Local authorities and their partners participating in the Net Zero Living Programme have been tackling these non-technological barriers, so that decarbonisation delivers better outcomes for people, services and local economies.

The Programme's seven Pathfinder Demonstrator projects were designed to test and refine new delivery models, approaches and tools in real life situations, so they are ready to deliver at scale locally or be adapted and replicated in other places.

For that reason, the lessons and common themes from these projects are particularly valuable. Despite operating in very different contexts, from urban to rural and island areas, and from district to regional scale, across

retrofit, energy planning and investment readiness, the Pathfinder Demonstrator projects converged on a small number of consistent insights about what enables delivery under real-world constraints.

Delivery capacity in real world conditions

Delivery capacity has long been identified as a constraint on net zero delivery. The Pathfinder Demonstrator projects show that this constraint becomes most acute at specific points in the delivery process. Progress accelerated when councils focused on building the delivery muscle needed to design viable projects, align partners, manage procurement and move decisions through organisational systems at pace.

Net zero is the how not the why of delivery

The Pathfinder Demonstrator projects reinforce the wider learning from the Net Zero Living Programme that net zero delivery must be grounded in outcomes that matter locally. Councils that framed work around warmer homes, lower bills, jobs, health and resilience found it easier to sustain momentum, navigate political change and engage communities.

The local authorities are effective conveners and enablers of place-based delivery

A clear pattern across the Pathfinder Demonstrators is the role adopted by local authorities delivering large-scale, complex work. In each project, the local authority was most effective as a convener. It set direction, brought the right partners together, put governance and data in place, and then enabled others to deliver. Universities, community organisations, delivery partners and investors all played essential roles, but the mandate to coordinate place-based delivery sat most effectively with the local authority.

Trust is a foundation

Trust, proximity, familiarity and lived experience are foundational. In the Net Zero Living Programme's Pathfinder Demonstrator projects, trust was built through familiar local partners, visible demonstrations and honest engagement. Community anchors, local champions, familiar contractors and co-designed investment plans all helped build public confidence and frame net zero around outcomes people care about.

* Other UK bodies such as the National Audit Office (NAO), Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and the Institute for Government (IfG).

10 Models, approaches and tools ready for real-world scale

Learning by doing is the unlock in complex systems

The Net Zero Living Programme Pathfinder Demonstrator projects show that accelerating delivery in complex environments with many organisations involved needs detailed information that only comes from doing the work in practice. Asset level typologies, street-based interventions, one-to-one engagement, demonstrator homes, user-led journeys, housing stock assessments, and investment grade plans all provided reliable information on cost, risk, sequencing and governance that could not have been predicted in advance.

This is a distinctive learning from the Programme. Net zero is complex and place-based delivery adds further layers of uncertainty. The Net Zero Living Programme created the space and permission for local authorities and their partners to learn by doing, using delivery itself as the way to test, reflect and improve. Innovation is not only about new technology, but about creating and refining new models, processes, methods, and tools through experimentation, trial and error, and hands-on delivery.

Each of the Net Zero Living Programme's Pathfinder Demonstrator projects applied this learning-by-doing approach in a different delivery context:

- **Leicestershire Collaborate to Accelerate to Net Zero (CAN):** Leicestershire County Council showed how places with limited resources can coordinate partners, investment and delivery to strengthen long-term capacity for local energy action that creates jobs and supports communities.
- **Rossendale's Net Zero Terraced Streets:** Rossendale Borough Council and partners have developed a coordinated, end-to-end retrofit model for traditionally hard-to-heat terraced housing at scale.
- **Bristol and the West of England's Mission Net Zero:** Bristol City Council and the eleven other project partners created strong foundations to be ready for investment at scale
- **Realising Net Zero Liverpool:** Liverpool City Council and partners moved from high-level net zero plans to asset-level, investor-ready energy portfolios across power, heat and transport.

- **Peterborough Accelerated Net Zero:** Peterborough City Council used new tools to support the first stage of project planning, from project prioritisation and resource allocation to the creation of coordinated investment-ready portfolios
- **Retrofit One Stop Shop York (ROSSY):** York City Council and partners developed a retrofit one-stop-shop for residential buildings in the city.
- **Rural Energy Hubs:** Orkney and Shetland Islands Councils demonstrated how rural energy hubs and their services can accelerate decarbonisation while benefiting rural and island communities.



**View full
resource
pack →**

Tools and resources



Creating Better Places: the diagnostic canvas

The *Creating Better Places diagnostic canvas* is a fast diagnostic to understand what's holding progress back, and where to focus next.

This bespoke diagnostic canvas is a short diagnostic tool. It helps you understand what is currently holding progress back in your place and decide where to focus next. It is designed for people working in, or alongside, UK local authorities which are shaping and delivering place-based change.

Use this diagnostic canvas at the start of a project when progress has stalled, or when priorities or partnerships are shifting, to identify what is holding progress back and decide where to focus next before committing to detailed plans or delivery.

What this diagnostic canvas is for

Use the canvas to:

- Build a shared understanding of your current situation
- Identify the main constraint on progress right now
- Align colleagues across services
- Decide which resource packs to explore next

It works well for individual reflection or in short cross-service workshops.

You do not need to complete every box perfectly. The value lies in the discussion it prompts.

How to use it in 15 minutes

- **Start with people and place.**
Be specific about the problem you are trying to solve. Avoid generic goals such as “net zero” or “innovation”.
- **Be honest about what feels constrained.**
Notice where answers feel unclear, contested or fragile. These often point to the real blockers.
- **Avoid jumping straight to solutions.**
The canvas is designed to help you understand why progress is difficult before deciding what to do.
- **Focus on what matters most now.**
Identify one or two areas that most limit progress at this stage.
- **Use the signposts.**
Each section points to relevant resource packs. Use these for deeper insight, practical steps and examples from other places.

What to do next

Agree the main constraint(s), select the most relevant resource pack(s), and use them to explore ways that other UK local authorities have navigated similar challenges. The canvas can be revisited as priorities and conditions change.

Creating Better Places: diagnostic canvas

A fast diagnostic to understand what's holding progress back and where to focus next

Start here: purpose, people and place

What problem are we really trying to solve for people or place?
(E.g., warmer homes, lower bills, reliable services, local jobs)
NB. "net zero", "retrofit" or "innovation" are not outcomes.

What is it about this place that shapes what will or won't work?
(E.g., housing stock, geography, governance, politics, culture)

Who most needs this to work and who does it need to work for first?
(Be specific)

Still not sure where to begin? Start with resource packs 01 and 02

Governance and strategic alignment

Which strategic priorities does this project genuinely advance?

- Council / Corporate Plan
- Housing
- Economy / Growth

Health and wellbeing

Climate / Net zero

Capital programme

If challenged, could you explain this project as:

- Relevant to residents?
- Worth senior sponsorship?
- Necessary for delivery?

Still not sure where to begin? Go to resource packs 03 and 04

Partners and assets

Who must be involved for this to progress and why?
(Be specific about who needs to be involved; this is not about who to consult)

What assets already reduce delivery risk?
(E.g., data, platforms, anchor institutions, skills, trusted intermediaries)

What are we under-using or overlooking locally?
(Be specific about partners and assets)

Still not sure where to begin? Go to resource packs 05, 06 and 07

What next?

Priority constraint(s):

Resource packs to explore next:

Readiness snapshot

Focus on the one or two areas that feel most constrained

Constraint	YES	PARTLY	NOT YET	Primary resource pack	Secondary resource pack
Mandate and legitimacy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Resource Pack 01	Resource Pack 02
Clear local authority role	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Creating Better Places handbook	Resource Packs 05, 08
Governance and continuity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Resource Packs 03, 04	Resource Packs 06, 07
Partnerships that deliver	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Resource Packs 05	Resource Packs 06, 07
Route to delivery	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Resource Packs 08	Resource Packs 09, 10

Local authority role

What role must the local authority play for progress to happen?

- System convenor
- Place-maker
- Market-shaper

Trusted broker

Delivery enabler

What role should the local authority not play and why? Who is better placed to play it?

Still not sure where to begin? Go to Creating Better Places handbook

Route to delivery

Where does progress currently stall?

- Mandate / legitimacy
- Role clarity
- Governance / decision routes
- Partnerships
- Skills / suppliers
- Finance / investment
- Delivery capacity

If we could make one change in the next 12 months to improve the route to delivery, which barrier would we tackle first and why?

Still not sure where to begin? Go to resource pack 08, then 09 – 10

Navigation: “what do I need?”

I want to	Why	Go to resource pack
Build public mandate	Legitimacy, trust, fairness, and early public engagement shape the outcomes and accelerate delivery.	1 Putting people at the centre of place-based change
Align projects and activity to the strategic priorities	Make the case for decarbonisation where it enables local priorities.	2 Embedding net zero as an enabler of better services
Build local authority delivery muscle	Skills, confidence, delivery structures, and internal systems are the base conditions for all progress.	3 Building local authority capacity
Embed climate into governance and decision-making	Strong governance helps navigate changes in structure, and leadership changes.	4 Governance to navigate political and institutional change
Partner for delivery	Most net zero delivery happens through others. Well-designed partnerships unlock scale, capability and innovation that no single organisation can deliver alone.	5 Enabling partnerships for place-based innovation
Act regionally to scale impact	Regional collaboration enables shared capability, pooled resources and greater investment confidence, particularly for infrastructure and skills.	6 Regional collaboration to scale climate action
Use data and digital tools to enable collaboration	Data is most powerful when it supports shared understanding and better decisions, not just reporting. The right tools help partners align and prioritise action.	7 Digital platforms for collaboration
Link plans and net zero roadmaps to investable pipelines	Clear pipelines, early feasibility and prioritisation are what unlock funding and move from ambition to delivery.	8 Building investable pipelines
Build skills and supply chains around real demand	Skills and supply chain development only works when aligned to visible, future demand from credible pipelines, not abstract targets.	9 Strengthening the supply chain and workforce
Learn how others put new models and mechanisms in place for real-world delivery	New models and mechanisms tested in real places show how to tackle non-technological barriers in practice, helping others de-risk and accelerate delivery.	10 Models, approaches and tools ready for real-world scale

Insights index

1. Putting people at the centre of place-based change

1.1 Calderdale's Citizens' Jury

How Calderdale Council's first Citizens' Jury helped shape its retrofit strategy.

1.2 Designing better climate tools by listening differently in Caerphilly

How Caerphilly County Borough Council used informal engagement to shape a whole-system net zero toolkit.

1.3 Gwynedd's just transition model: community energy where it's needed most

How Gwynedd Council is tackling fuel poverty through community-owned heat and power.

2. Embedding net zero as an enabler of better services

2.1 Reframing net zero as an engine for inclusive growth

How Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council created economic development, job creation and democratic renewal through net zero.

2.2 Retrofit as a health and social outcomes agenda

How Cardiff Council made the case for housing retrofit as a driver of health, economic and social outcomes.

2.3 Unlocking wider benefits from net zero

How Wakefield Council rewired strategy, planning and investment, to make net zero a shared responsibility.

3. Building local authority capacity

3.1 From carbon literacy to coordinated action

How Forest of Dean's carbon literacy programme evolved into organisational delivery capability.

3.2 Building an organisational learning culture

How Warrington Borough Council strengthened delivery capacity across services.

3.3 Making net zero part of core council business

How Portsmouth City Council built the systems and skills to support delivery.

4. Governance to navigate political and institutional change

4.1 Embedding net zero through local government reorganisation

How Westmorland and Furness Council used the transition to unitary status to place climate action at the heart of a new local authority.

4.2 Shared frameworks that create stability in a changing political and institutional landscape

How Peterborough City Council and Southampton City Council used shared data platforms and evidence that provided continuity through change.

4.3 Hardwiring climate into financial and institutional systems

How Manchester City Council embedded climate finance, governance and accountability to maintain momentum beyond individual teams or political cycles.

5. Enabling partnerships for place-based innovation

5.1 Oxford's matchmaking scheme

Pairing local organisations with funders to unlock place-based delivery.

5.2 Lambeth Climate Partnership

Building a business climate ecosystem through sustained collaboration.

5.3 From research to real-world pilots

How Westmorland and Furness Council partnered with local businesses to deliver low-carbon food innovation.

6. Regional collaboration to scale climate action

6.1 Locally Determined Contributions

How Cambridgeshire County Council's approach aligned climate ambition and action across local authorities.

6.2 Building regional partnerships for local climate finance

How Runnymede Borough Council pioneered a new regional model.

6.3 Structuring collaboration through a Climate Commission

How Derry City and Strabane District Council formalised regional delivery.

7. Unlocking insight through data and digital platforms

7.1 Convening a whole-ecosystem climate strategy

How South Downs National Park Authority acted without statutory net zero powers.

7.2 From strategy to delivery through modular platforms

How Peterborough City Council and edenseven developed a shared digital platform to turn strategy into delivery.

7.3 Using data to inform sustainable procurement

How the London Borough of Newham and Warrington Borough Council used owned and open datasets in decision-making.

8. Building investable pipelines

- 8.1 De-risking infrastructure to unlock investment**
How Belfast City Council built an investable net zero pipeline.
- 8.2 Bridging community planning and investable pipelines**
How Mission Net Zero is bridging community planning and investable pipelines in Bristol and the West of England.
- 8.3 Stress-testing green finance models**
How Surrey County Council built resilience ahead of local government reorganisation.

9. Strengthening the supply chain and workforce

- 9.1 Building retrofit delivery by investing in local skills**
How Perth and Kinross Council turned a supply-chain gap into a catalyst for workforce development.
- 9.2 Targeted skills development across the ecosystem**
How the London Borough of Newham combined internal capacity-building with targeted external skills activity to support future delivery.

10. Models, approaches and tools ready for real-world scale

- 10.1 Leicestershire Can Accelerate to Net Zero**
Leicestershire County Council showed how places with limited resources could coordinate partners, investment and delivery to strengthen long-term capacity for local energy action.
- 10.2 Rossendale's Net Zero Terraced Streets**
Rossendale Borough Council and partners developed a coordinated, end-to-end retrofit model for traditional terraced housing at scale.
- 10.3 Bristol and the West of England's Mission Net Zero**
Bristol City Council and the eleven other project partners created strong foundations to be ready for investment at scale.
- 10.4 Realising Net Zero Liverpool**
Liverpool City Council and partners moved from high-level net zero plans to asset-level, investor-ready energy portfolios across power, heat and transport.

- 10.5 Peterborough Accelerated Net Zero**
Peterborough City Council used tools to support the first stage of project planning from project prioritisation and resource allocation to the creation of coordinated investment ready portfolios.
- 10.6 Retrofit One Stop Shop York (ROSSY) and YorEnergy**
York City Council and partners developed a retrofit one-stop-shop for residential buildings in the city.
- 10.7 Rural Energy Hubs**
Orkney and Shetland Island Councils demonstrated how rural energy hubs and their services can accelerate decarbonisation in rural and island communities.

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The content of this handbook reflects the collective insights drawn from the Programme and does not necessarily represent the official position of Innovate UK, participating local authorities or their partner organisations.

Creating Better Places

Ten areas where local innovation can improve lives and unlock growth



Delivered by Urban Foresight for Innovate UK's Net Zero Living Programme.

Grounded in insights from the local authorities who participated in Innovate UK's Net Zero Living Programme

