



Innovate
UK

Welcome



The value of participation

Exploring the potential economic impact of public participation
in the Net Zero Living programme
January 2026

A thriving local economy depends on five types of capital:

the natural world, the people within it, the communities that connect them, the infrastructure that enables them, and the financial systems that link it all together.

But capital alone isn't enough — the way decisions get made about it matters too.



Through thirteen Citizens Engagements, residents helped shape 193 recommendations for how we can grow sustainably.



Here's what they said:

The majority of recommendations support enabling conditions for long-term economic activity

74% of all *(against the 5 capitals model) recommendations create capital directly*

- ↳ 20% of all recommendations create capital indirectly
- ↳ 51% of all recommendations create social and manufactured capital

70% of all recommendations would create jobs (if implemented)

- ↳ 30% Clean Energy jobs
- ↳ 58% jobs critical to a Just Transition

23% could create opportunities for private business

Executive Summary

This report explores the relationship between public participation and economic activity in the context of place-based net-zero transitions, using the Five Capitals model as an analytical framework. It examines how recommendations generated through citizen engagement processes may contribute to economic value by strengthening underlying economic assets.

The analysis draws on desk research and secondary analysis of a dataset comprising 193 recommendations generated through 13 citizen engagement processes. Participants were not asked to consider economic impacts explicitly. Instead, the research infers economic implications through systematic analysis of the recommendations themselves.



Executive Summary

Each recommendation was coded against the five capitals - human, social, manufactured, natural and financial - to assess its potential direct and indirect contributions if implemented.

Recommendations were also analysed using ONS Standard Occupational Classification (SOC2020) categories to identify associated job opportunities, and compared with the UK Clean Energy Job Plan to explore areas of alignment and divergence.

The study does not seek to quantify GDP impacts or forecast employment. Rather, it provides a qualitative, systems-based assessment of how public participation relates to economic activity through capital formation and labour demand.



Findings

74% of public recommendations would directly increase one of the five capitals, with 20% also having a further indirect impact on the five capitals, if implemented. Public participation contributes to economic activity primarily by building the assets, capabilities and delivery conditions that underpin long-term, place-based activity.

70% of public recommendations have clear implications for job opportunities if implemented. Public participation is closely linked to real economic activity, even when economic outcomes are not an explicit focus. This demonstrates that participatory processes consistently surface proposals requiring labour, skills and ongoing delivery effort.

30% of recommendations imply job opportunities linked to priority clean energy occupations. The majority of roles relate to planning, land management, care, coordination and communications, that are often overlooked in national strategies yet are essential to delivering net zero at place level.

23% of recommendations have a potential implication for private business activity if implemented. Although this is a relatively small proportion, public participation plays a more foundational role by shaping the social and institutional conditions that enable private enterprise to emerge.

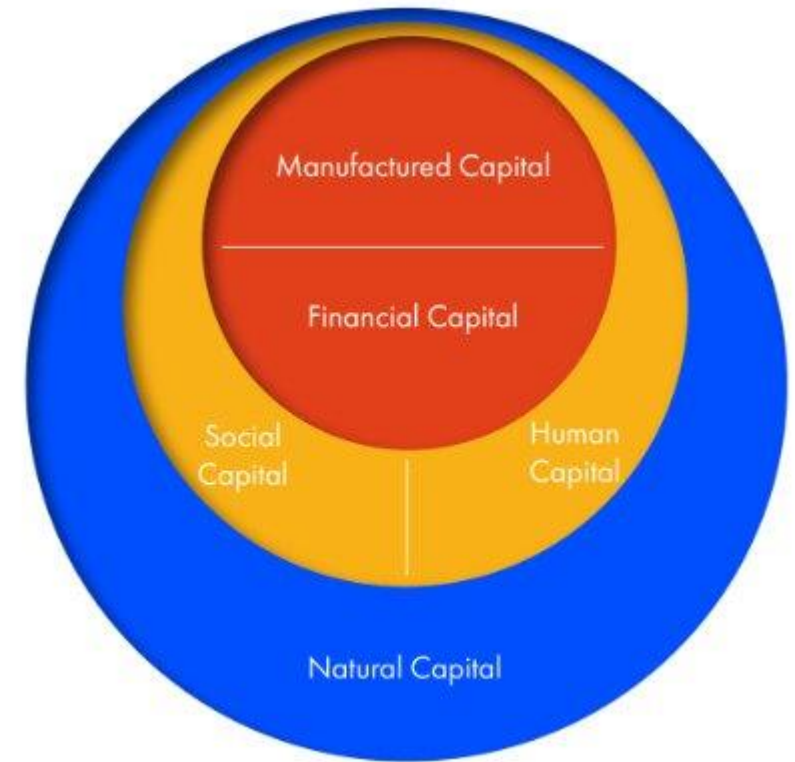
Introduction

In 2025, as part of the IUK Thriving Places programme, a consortium of organisations including Involve, Forum for the Future, Ipsos and Quantum Strategy & Technology conducted a series of citizen engagement processes to develop visions and recommendations for local places to achieve a net zero transition.

This research examines the economic impact of public participation in the context of the transition to a net-zero economy, using the [Five Capitals model](#) as an analytical framework.

Our research questions were as follows:

- What is the relationship between public participation and economic activity?
- How might the recommendations from public participation events associated with the Net Zero Living Programme create jobs and contribute directly or indirectly to each of the five capitals, if implemented?



Context

The link between the Five Capitals and economic activity

Economic activity, typically measured through Gross Domestic Product (GDP), can be understood as a **flow** of revenue generated by an economy over a given period. The Five Capitals model reframes this by drawing attention to the **stocks** of assets that make those flows possible.

When these capital stocks are strong and well aligned, they generate sustained economic flows. Human capital enables productive labour and innovation. Manufactured capital provides the infrastructure and tools for production. Social capital reduces friction and enables coordination. Natural capital supplies essential resources and life-supporting systems, while financial capital mobilises investment across the system. GDP, in this sense, is a useful if imperfect proxy measure for how effectively an economy is drawing value from its asset base.



Context

The link between the Five Capitals and economic activity

Crucially, GDP does not distinguish between income generated by maintaining or enhancing capital stocks, and income generated by running them down. An economy can increase GDP in the short term while depleting skills, trust, infrastructure quality or ecosystems, thereby undermining its future capacity to generate income.

From this perspective, sustainable economic activity depends on protecting, replenishing and strengthening capital stocks overtime. Strategies that invest in human capability, institutional trust, resilient infrastructure and healthy ecosystems expand the productive base of the economy, ensuring the economy is more stable, resilient and inclusive.

Using this lens enables us to identify the economic impact of a broader set of activities that may otherwise be excluded from a narrow economic analysis.



Methodology

We analysed 193 recommendations generated through 13 citizen engagement processes (see the Appendix for full details of the engagement processes). The engagement processes included:

- eight citizen visioning processes,
- four community conversations and
- one citizen jury.

Each of these engagement processes had a different calling question or topic. Of these:

- Eight focused on responses to climate change that centre healthy people and places
- Two focused on heat and energy
- One focused on transport
- One focused on flooding
- One focused on homes

We coded/mapped each recommendation to the five capitals it would create or reinforce if implemented, including both direct and indirect impacts.

Finally, we analysed the recommendations using ONS Standard Occupational Classification categories to identify the types of roles and jobs they relate to and compared these findings with the Clean Energy Job Plan to identify areas of alignment and divergence.



Sample data

Recommendation	Direct Capital Impact	Indirect Capital impact	Direct job opportunity (ONS SOC Classification)	Indirect job opportunity
Improve the quality of existing homes. Introduce minimum standards related to climate change to renovate and retrofit all existing houses, supported by measures that are affordable e.g. grants.	Capital: Manufactured Rationale: improving the environmental credentials of housing stock	Capital: Human Rationale: creates health benefits for residents	53 Bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, glaziers / construction and building trades 92 Elementary construction occupations 24 Construction project managers and related professionals (retrofit advisor)	Retrofit business
Set up at least one community garden or micro-forest in each parish/locality	Capital: Natural Rationale: creating new green spaces for biodiversity	Capital: Social Rationale: increasing neighbourhood desirability and local pride	51 Gardeners and landscape gardeners	
Design towns and communities in ways that support people's physical and mental health: places that are safe, walkable, green, and well connected.	Capital: Manufactured Rationale: creating community and green infrastructure	Capital: Human Rationale: creates health and wellbeing benefits for residents	51 Gardeners and landscape gardeners 24 Architects, Town Planners and Surveyors	



Data Analysis

Data point: Of the 193 recommendations, 74% would directly increase one of the five capitals if implemented, with 6 recommendations having a direct impact on two capitals simultaneously (*figure 1*).

38 of the recommendations (20%) also created capital indirectly, the majority of which was natural capital (*figure 2*).

Implication for the relationship between public participation and economic activity:

Public participation generates proposals that are asset-building rather than purely aspirational or consumption-oriented.

In other words, the public is not simply calling for short-term benefits or symbolic actions, but for interventions that would strengthen the underlying capital base of the economy, the assets that support long-term economic activity.

Figure 1

Direct increase in capital if recommendations implemented:

74%

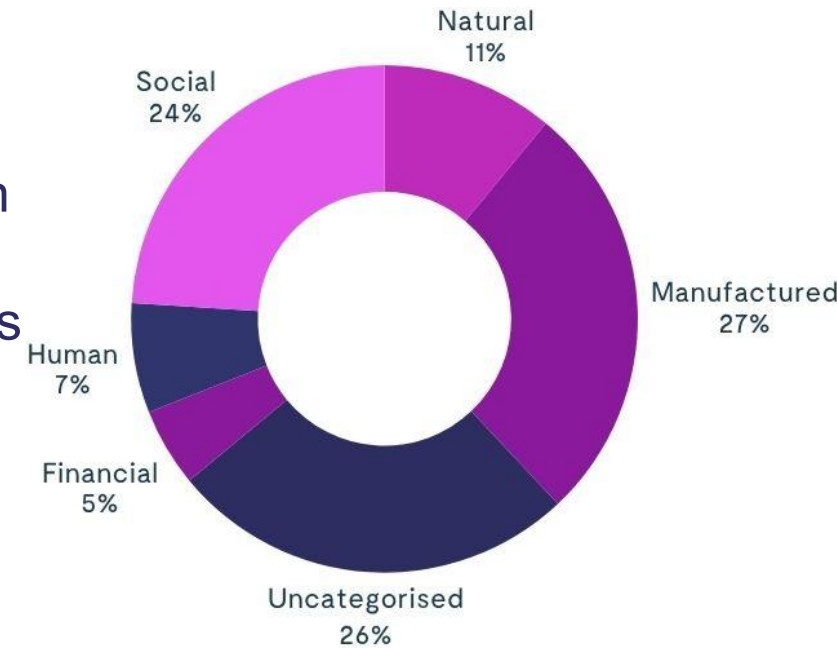
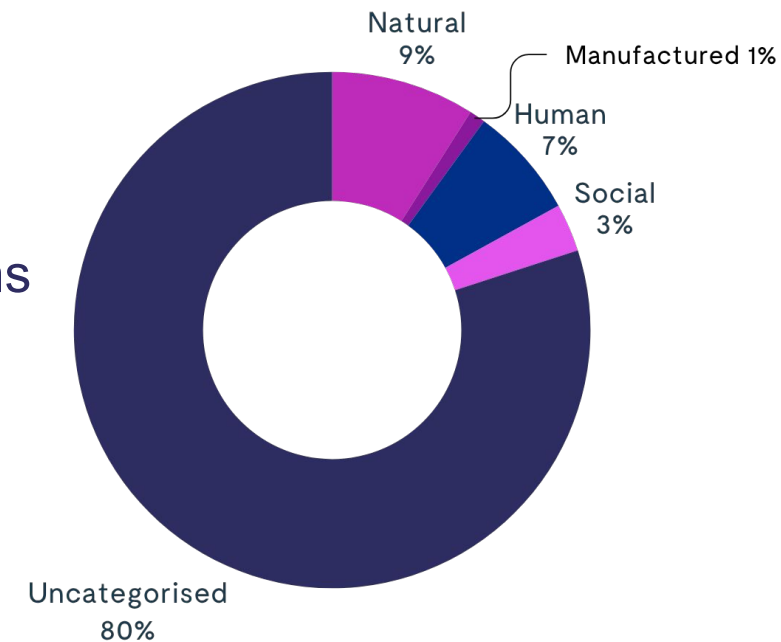


Figure 2

Indirect increase in capital if recommendations implemented:

20%



Data Analysis

Data point: Of those recommendations that would directly impact the five capitals, the majority would impact manufactured (27%) and social (24%) capital (*figure 1*).

Implication for the relationship between public participation and economic activity:

Conventional economic models often treat social capital as external or incidental. Yet when asked to consider how change should happen, people instinctively gravitate towards the social conditions that make places more liveable and hence create the conditions that make economic activity possible.

Data Analysis

Data point: Of the 193 recommendations, 135 (70%) had a clear implication for job opportunities if implemented. Of these, the majority correlated with planning; gardening/landscaping and marketing/communications roles. **See Figure 3.**

Implication for the relationship between public participation and economic activity:

That 70% of public recommendations imply job creation demonstrates that public participation is closely linked to the real economy of delivery, surfacing the labour and skills required to implement place-based net-zero transitions.

When people are invited to shape place-based net-zero transitions, they consistently generate proposals that require labour, skills and ongoing economic activity to deliver.

Figure 3



Data Analysis

Data point: Of the 135 job opportunities identified in our analysis, 30% matched the priority clean energy occupations. A large number of these related to jobs in planning and surveying.

Of the 135 job opportunities identified in our analysis, 58% did not match the priority clean energy jobs. These tend to be jobs such as gardening/farming/landscaping, caring roles, or positions on steering groups.

Implication for the relationship between public participation and economic activity:

While national clean jobs strategies capture an important subset of transition-related employment, public participation reveals a far broader economic landscape of roles and activities that are essential to delivering net zero at place level, that nonetheless represent important economic activity.

Data Analysis

Data point: 44 of the recommendations (23%) have a potential implication for private business activity if implemented in local areas.

Implication for the relationship between public participation and economic activity:

Although a relatively small proportion of recommendations point directly to private business activity, the overall pattern suggests that public participation plays a more important role in creating the enabling conditions and demand signals that allow private enterprise to emerge and thrive.

These business opportunities were:

- Construction and retrofit businesses
- Retrofit advisory services
- Businesses selling construction and retrofit materials
- Water companies increasing management, planning and maintenance
- Businesses enabling circularity via waste, recycling or repair services
- Renewable energy companies
- Community owned renewable energy organisations
- Citizen science organisations
- Gardening and landscaping businesses
- Architectural and design companies
- Market garden businesses
- Farm advisory services
- Engineering companies

Limitations

Of the 13 citizen engagement processes, eight focused on responses to climate change that centre healthy people and places, two focused on heat and energy, one focused on transport, one focused on flooding and one focused on homes.

The framing of the questions that form the basis of the engagement process inevitably shapes the recommendations and resulting opportunities. Our analysis therefore infers insights about the relationship between public participation and economic activity, however it does not directly represent the views of participants as they were not explicitly asked to consider the impact of their recommendations on economic activity.

Because the scope and wording of engagement questions shapes the types of recommendations generated, the distribution of capital impacts and job types reflects the issues participants were invited to consider, not an unconstrained view of economic priorities.



Limitations

Recommendations vary in specificity and maturity, from high-level principles to operational proposals. Therefore, some recommendations may over- or under-represent economic implications depending on how fully they were articulated.

Coding the recommendations against the Five Capitals and SOC2020 categories involves interpretive judgement. While systematic, the analysis reflects our analytical choices that others might classify differently.

The study is intended to surface patterns, pathways and hypotheses about the relationship between public participation and economic activity, rather than to provide definitive measures of economic impact.



Appendix: Citizen Engagement Processes

Citizen Jury	Calderdale	How can we make Calderdale homes warmer, healthier, and cheaper to heat? (and greener!)
Citizen Visioning	Blaenau Gwent	How can Blaenau Gwent come together to make local travel fairer, greener and better for everyone?
	Dorset	What do you imagine Dorset would look like if it was ready for climate change? How can we make that happen in a way that is fair to people and nature?
	Forest of Dean	How can we create a happy and fair future for Coleford while working together to respond to the challenges of climate change?"
	Gateshead	What future energy systems do we want in High Fell, Windy Nook and Whitehills? How can any changes be done in a way that works for residents?
	Newham	How can we work together to make sure North Woolwich has heat and energy that is reliable, affordable and green?"
	Northumberland	
	Nottingham	"What should Broxtowe Borough Council prioritise to tackle flooding in a fair way?"
	Wakefield	How do we build on our district's rich history and cultural diversity to shape a thriving, healthy and greener place to live?'
Community Conversation	Derry and Strabane	The aim was to put citizen ambitions for the future of the place they call home at the heart of the emerging sustainability and climate action plans of the Commission and Council.
	Blackpool	What can we all do to prepare for the impacts of climate change, whilst making our town a better place to live?
	Three Rivers	What could a positive response to climate change look like in Three Rivers, and how can citizens and council work together to make it happen?
	Warrington	What can we all do to prepare for and reduce the impacts of climate change, whilst making our town a better place to live?



Acknowledgments

Thank you to the citizens who took part in the public participation events held across the UK during 2025.

The full data set for this report can be viewed [here](#).

For more information, please visit the programme website [here](#).

If you have any questions, please contact: involve@involve.org.uk