



Public attitudes to net zero and infrastructure

A study into public aspirations, perceived risks and trade offs in transition to a low carbon economy

Executive summary

The transition to net zero is going to play a central role in government policy and the public's lives for the decades to come. Central to this is the future of new infrastructure projects and their net zero story.

Copper has measured public attitudes to infrastructure for over 5 years to understand sentiment around key areas of our industry. Now, we have studied public attitudes to net zero to understand where the public needs support in understanding the future of infrastructure.

This report explores the public's views on net zero, new infrastructure projects, government policy, the willingness to change habits and activities to support climate change.

It is clear from research that the public grasp the nuances around major infrastructure projects and net zero requirements, including carbon offsetting. There is a willingness to change day to day lives to accommodate a reduction in carbon emissions, but no consensus on how to pay for net zero.

An honest conversation is expected by the public when it comes to new projects and the transition to net zero.

Why we studied public attitudes to net zero emissions

Context

This year sees the UK host the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow. The summit will bring parties together to accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris Agreement and UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The UK is already committed to working towards ambitious net zero targets – in [June 2019](#), [Parliament](#) passed legislation requiring the Government to reduce the UK's net emissions of greenhouse gases by 100% by 2050. Net zero refers to achieving a balance between the amount of greenhouse gas emissions produced and the amount removed from the atmosphere. The UK makes up less than 1% of global emissions and demonstrating a path to net zero, the UK hopes to set an example that others can follow.

Introduction to the report

Copper Consultancy has conducted research to find out what the public thinks about infrastructure and net zero. Our background in understanding attitudes to infrastructure tells a story of pragmatic views, but a lack of support in helping people understand complex issues.

The drive towards net zero will play a central role in Government policy and decisions on infrastructure and major projects for many years to come. Government's ambitions around levelling up the UK, supporting the economy and hitting net zero targets all meet in the infrastructure sector. The fight to stop global temperatures rising is one of the most complex when played out on the ground. Infrastructure is often caught in the middle, requiring a balance between achieving net zero targets, supporting economic growth and levelling up across the UK.

In this report, we have set out to measure the public's understanding of the overlap between infrastructure and net zero ambitions. The report aims to shed some light on how the Government, clients, promoters and project teams can respond to this challenge.

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Climate change will be used to oppose projects, but individual concerns are still more pressing

Recommendations



The days of major projects not being net zero and not having a compelling story of how they are taking responsibility for emissions are over. It is important to explain what net zero means for a project – even 'bad news' – as the public grasps the implications of a project on net zero targets.



Strategies for offsetting carbon emissions need more clarity in order to secure public understanding.



A national narrative is needed to explain how some infrastructure projects are inherently not 'net zero' but are required to support the economy. There is not a 'one rule' approach when considering the value of projects.



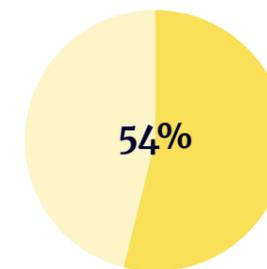
An honest conversation is expected by the public and industry needs to respond to address this demand – people understand that not all projects are inherently net zero.

Section 1

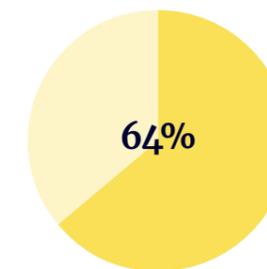
The public sees climate change as one of our greatest challenges and say they are motivated to address it

The principles of climate change and net zero are accepted by the public. There is a consensus that climate change is one of the biggest issues globally and the majority of people are willing and motivated to address the challenge – 53% feel motivated to take action in their personal lives to address climate change.

Understanding is high



said they understand what net zero means

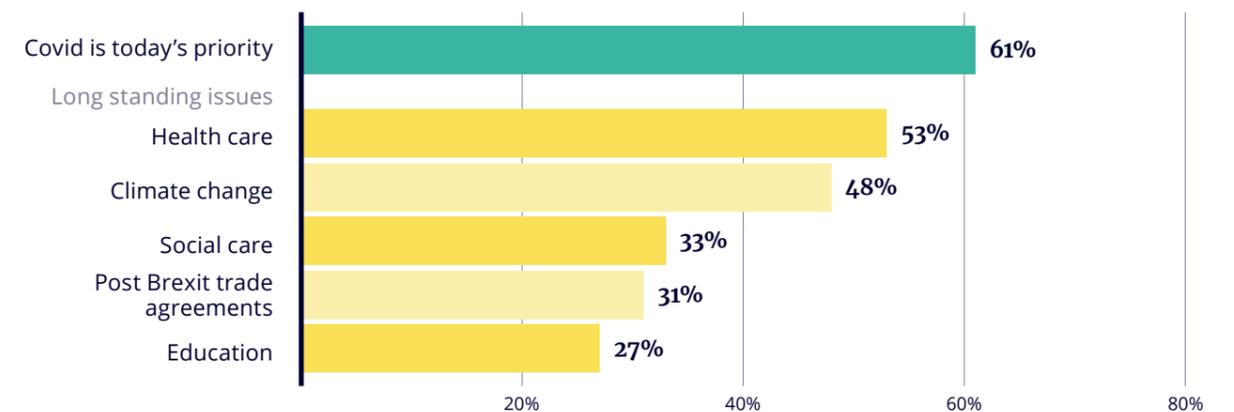


also believes that the wider public does not understand what net zero means

Copper asked respondents whether they are, or have previously been, aware of the government's plans to reduce CO₂ emissions by 78% by 2035 – 64% answered yes, with the highest level of awareness among 25-34 year olds (69.5%). The lowest level of awareness of government plans is among 45-54 age range, but still remains high at 59%.

Only 2.3% of respondents do not believe there is climate change.

Climate change is a priority



While the global pandemic remains the highest priority, other long standing issues remain important to people. COVID-19 aside, healthcare and climate change are the highest priorities, scoring higher than social care and education.

Voting behaviour presents a difference in views – Liberal Democrat voters scored climate change as the highest priority (63%), second only to COVID-19, compared to 46% of Green Party voters. Labour and Conservative voters both ranked healthcare (59% and 54% respectively) above climate change (53% and 44% respectively) as a priority issue.

Section 2

The public believe our own actions will have the biggest impact on addressing climate change

The public are willing to take action themselves to address climate change and believe individual actions have more impact than government legislation. At the moment, the public's willingness to take action is high – 74% are motivated to take action in their personal lives but only 43% consider taking action at work. There is a gap in understanding on who should take responsibility for emissions at work in the public's view.

Gender presents an interesting demographic split in who is more open to taking personal responsibility with 46% of men willing to change their own behaviours in relation to recycling, travel, energy use and food choices would be important in achieving climate goals, compared to 60% of women.

The impact of government decisions on individual behaviours

Only 37% say government support for infrastructure projects which are not net zero makes their personal efforts to address climate change feel less significant, but 45% said it makes their efforts feel equally or more important. Across all age brackets, the 55+ group feel most demoralised to take action against climate change in this context.

13%

say they don't think they have been asked to reduce their emissions while government supports new projects which generate emissions

58%

say they don't think government decisions impact their own behaviours

The public's view on the most important levers to pull in achieving climate goals:



54% agree that personal behaviours need to change

- 60% of women said this was their top priority compared to 46% of men



42% want to see more government legislation to make zero emission targets legally binding

- Lib Dem voters are most likely to support individual responsibility and government legislation as the two biggest levers the UK can pull
- Labour and Conservative voters take a similar view on the balance between personal responsibility and government legislation
- More men (43%) than women (40%) prefer the idea of government legislation



38% perceive that industry achieving net zero by 2050 should be the priority



36% say offsetting our emissions should be the national priority



33% say we should focus efforts on new technologies to reduce or capture emissions

The public think elected representatives need to be bolder

The current government strategy is seen as 'OK' but **53%** don't have confidence in what government is doing today



The most confident demographic by age are 24–44 year olds



The lowest levels of confidence sit in the 45–54 and 55+ age brackets

Across the UK, people in Wales are most likely to have the highest level of confidence in government actions to reverse climate change.



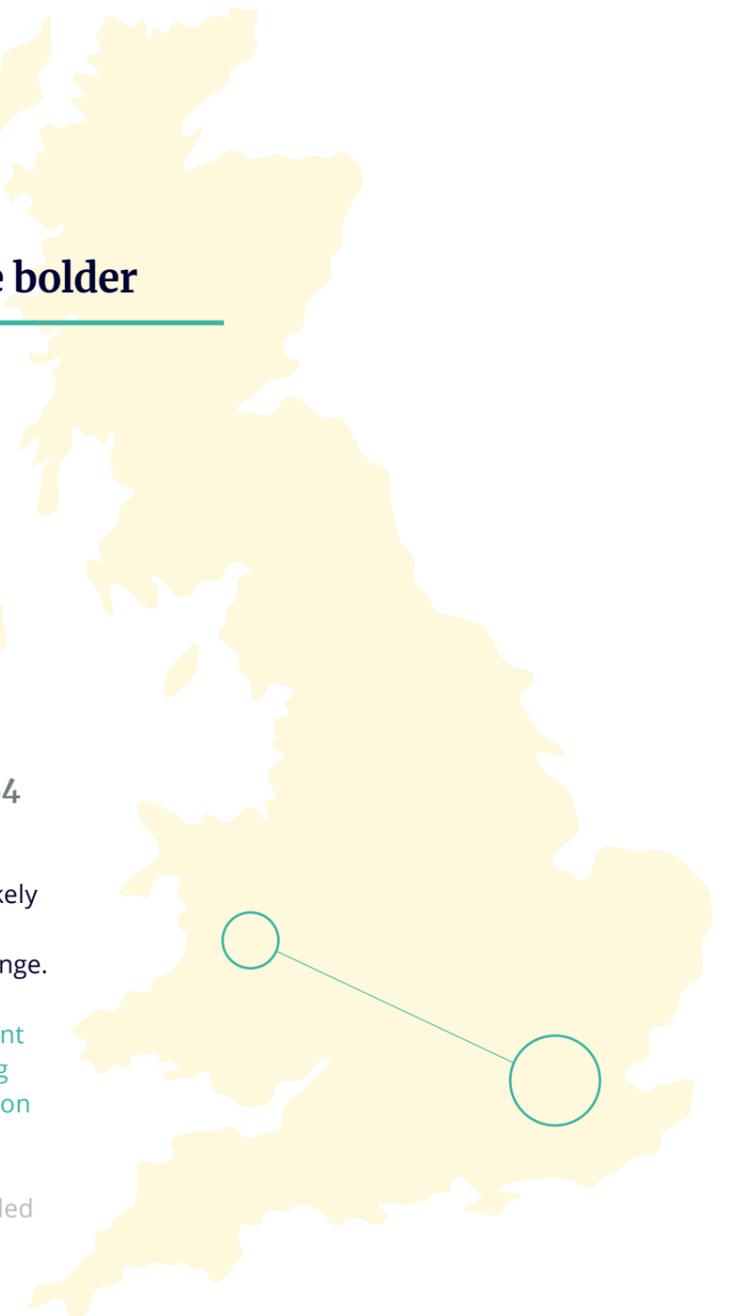
36% think government and industry is taking sufficiently quick action

35% disagree

with the rest undecided

Apathy towards government action is a key theme

Neither agree or disagree was the most commonly cited response when considering if they support the government's approach to reach net zero with apathetic views of respondents doubling with age. The 'strongly agrees' drop off to just 7% and 4% in ages 45–54 and 55+ respectively.



Section 3

What net zero means to people

This section explores what net zero means to individuals and how they view the impact of the transition to net zero for future generations, their health, wellbeing and employment opportunities.

The public says our actions to address climate change now will improve the lives of future generations.

76% feel that actions now will improve prospects for future generations; only 4% disagrees

This is consistent across a range of demographics and geographies. At the same time, the transition to net zero is not perceived as risk free and is seen as a threat to employment opportunities by some. But this view is not universal – only 25% say the transition to net zero would not benefit them.

In terms of quality of life and health, 41% believe that net zero will improve personal quality of life, whereas 28% do not believe net zero will improve their life and wellbeing. We found that 47% believe the transition to net zero will provide health improvements where they live – 28% don't and 24% are undecided.

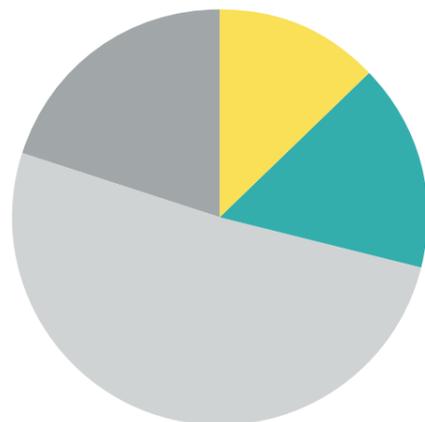
Net zero hesitancy is low

The benefits of a net zero world are broadly understood. We found 38% of over 55 year olds felt net zero would not benefit them compared with 8% for 16-24 year olds.

The East of England and Northern Ireland (both only 35%) residents say that the net zero transition will not benefit them – these areas of the UK show the highest levels of hesitancy to the net zero.

It is unclear to people if the net zero transition will make them more prosperous

Our study found:



13% of respondents think the transition to net zero will make them richer

16% say poorer

51% say about the same

20% don't know if it will change their personal wealth

The younger the respondent, the more likely they were to say the transition to net zero would make them better off financially – 17% of 16-24 year olds feel it will make them richer, compared to 6% of those 55+.

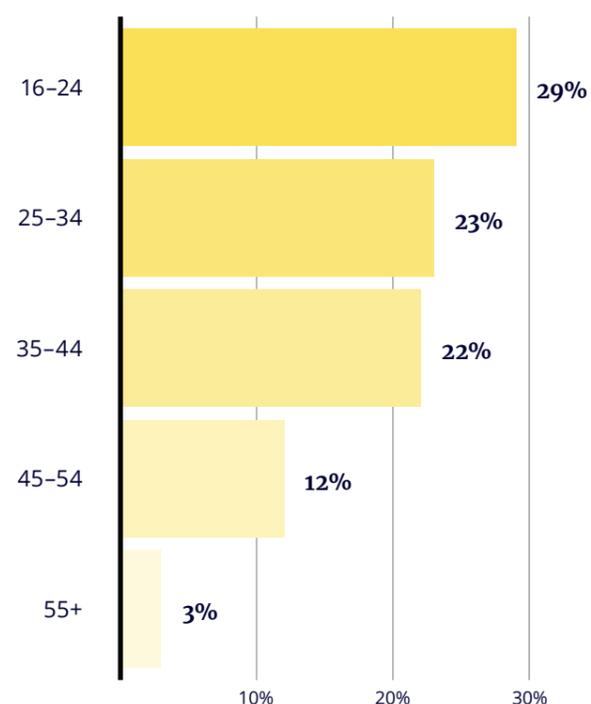
Geography plays a part too – 32% of East of England residents said they would be worse off compared to Greater London and Scotland (both 22%).

The transition to net zero is seen as a possible threat to employment opportunities

Only 14% said the net zero transition would improve job prospects

- 29% of 16-24 year olds feel a net zero economy will provide good job prospects compared to 12% for 45-54 year olds.
- Only 8% of residents of Glasgow and Manchester identified net zero as helping job prospects. Sheffield (18%), Cardiff and London (both 17%) were the highest to identify jobs prospects as an opportunity.

Do you feel a net zero economy will provide good job prospects?



What net zero means for the UK at home and abroad

The fight against climate change and the transition to net zero is seen as an opportunity for the UK – both in terms of improving domestic services and creating a global role for Britain.

At home, the public feels that net zero will deliver:

- Better energy services (40%)
- Export opportunities (33%)
- Create more jobs (28%)
- Better transport (25%)
- Only 14% believe there will be no benefit.

Men feel more strongly (40%) that the transition to net zero would allow the UK to export technology and skills around the world, compared to 26% of women.

When considering the UK's role globally:



41% says the UK is currently a global leader in achieving net zero

33% don't know if we are

18% say the UK is not

Section 4

There are nuanced trade-offs the public is willing to accept

In this section, we explore the compromises the public are willing to accept as we move to net zero. We examined people's daily lives such as how people travel, where they eat and how they shop.

In addition, we have tested public views on key transport policies around the world where governments have intervened to mandate change.

The public are willing to change how they go about their lives, but less so want they do

People would be willing to make changes to:



How they travel
50%



What they buy
48%



How they shop
43%



Where they eat
39%



Where they travel
39%

The areas where people are less willing to make changes included where they live with only 15% of the public prepared to make significant changes.

Encouragingly, only 9% of people said they wouldn't be willing to make any changes to their lives to move to net zero. Twice as many men (12%) compared to women (6%) are unwilling to make any changes.

Liberal Democrat voters are more likely to make lifestyle changes, compared to other political viewpoints.

Testing French government policy in the UK

As part of the research, people were asked about the French government's policy to ban short-haul internal flights where train alternatives exist. The plan, aimed at reducing carbon emissions, has ended flight options where the same journey could be made by train in under two and a half hours.

The French government's approach is popular in the UK, with **80% in support of a similar approach in the UK and 10% in opposition**. Around 8% are not sure about the policy and whether they would welcome the approach in the UK.

Conservative voters are the most likely to oppose this policy, but this still only stands at 12% opposition, compared to 8% among Labour voters and 9% among Liberal Democrats. Green Party voters show the least opposition at 4%.

There is little variation in views across age brackets. However, people living in Newcastle and Brighton, at opposite ends of England, are most likely to oppose this policy in the UK.

Section 5

There is no consensus on how to pay for net zero

Those who believe they would consider making adjustments in their lives to address climate change were asked whether they are willing to pay more than they do today for habits and lifestyles they would like to prioritise such as travel and eating behaviours.

The least popular approach to paying for net zero is unspecified taxation

Many are uncertain about how to approach paying for net zero, with 29% believing that there is no fair way to cover the costs of addressing climate change.

Half are prepared to pay towards the transition to net zero, providing they can continue with their lives as they are today. This acceptance reduces with age – 60% of 16-24 year olds and 56% of 24-44 year olds are willing to pay more, compared to 44% of those aged 45 and above.



Geographically, people living in the East Midlands are the least willing to pay towards net zero (40%).



Those living in London are more likely to support paying for net zero (66%), compared to between 40% and 50% in other areas of the UK.

In terms of how to pay, 36% of the public are willing to pay more tax to fund green infrastructure however, 46% are opposed to this idea.

Conservative voters are least willing to pay more tax

Politically, Conservative voters are least likely to pay more tax to support investment in green infrastructure (33%) whereas 41% of Labour voters and 54% of Liberal Democrat voters would be willing to pay more tax for greener infrastructure.

Overall, there is no consensus on how to pay for the transition net zero, with many unsure of their approach to financial contributions.

- 50% are willing to pay more if they can still continue with the same behaviours as they do today
- Only 36% are willing to pay more tax to fund green infrastructure which may provide a direct benefit; 46% opposed and 18% don't know
- People living in London are the most likely willing to pay for net zero (66%). Most cities are around (40% and 50%).
- The least popular payment approach was taxation (9%). 29% said there is no fair way to pay.

Section 6

Net zero and infrastructure – public expectations of industry’s response to climate change has been raised

This section explores the public’s expectations for infrastructure projects and net zero, focusing in on wider economic and societal benefits. Overall, people grasp the concept that other benefits of a project may balance its need to be net zero but still believe every effort should be made to ensure net zero outcomes and carbon offsetting.

The public understands that not all projects can or need to be net zero

If an infrastructure project provides vital economic or societal benefit – for example, job creation or financial gains for a local economy – but is not net zero, 57% of the public feel they would support it and could accept the project. This rises to 64% among Conservative voters.

In contrast, 18% of the public would oppose a project which is not inherently net zero. Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters are the least likely to oppose at 14%.

Despite this, 54% say new projects which are not inherently net zero – for example, new roads, airports and homes – do not complement government plans to address climate change.



People want to know how infrastructure is addressing climate change

Although the public understands the need for new projects in terms of the economy and benefits to communities, they still feel all projects should endeavour to be net zero, whether that is directly through the project or by offsetting carbon emissions. There is strong support for offsetting emissions (69%) and requiring new infrastructure projects to explain how they are net zero and addressing climate change (69%).

68%

say all projects should be net zero

69%

say all projects should offset emissions; only 5% say not

69%

say projects should be required to explain their net zero story

People grasp the nuances around infrastructure and net zero, but there are gaps in understanding

Around 55% believe that projects which boost the economy should continue alongside government objectives to reduce emissions and the transition to net zero. The government is continuing to progress and develop plans for renewable energy and electric vehicle infrastructure, but only 69% of people feel that these are complementary to wider plans to address climate change.

Social and economic benefits are recognised as reasons to support investment

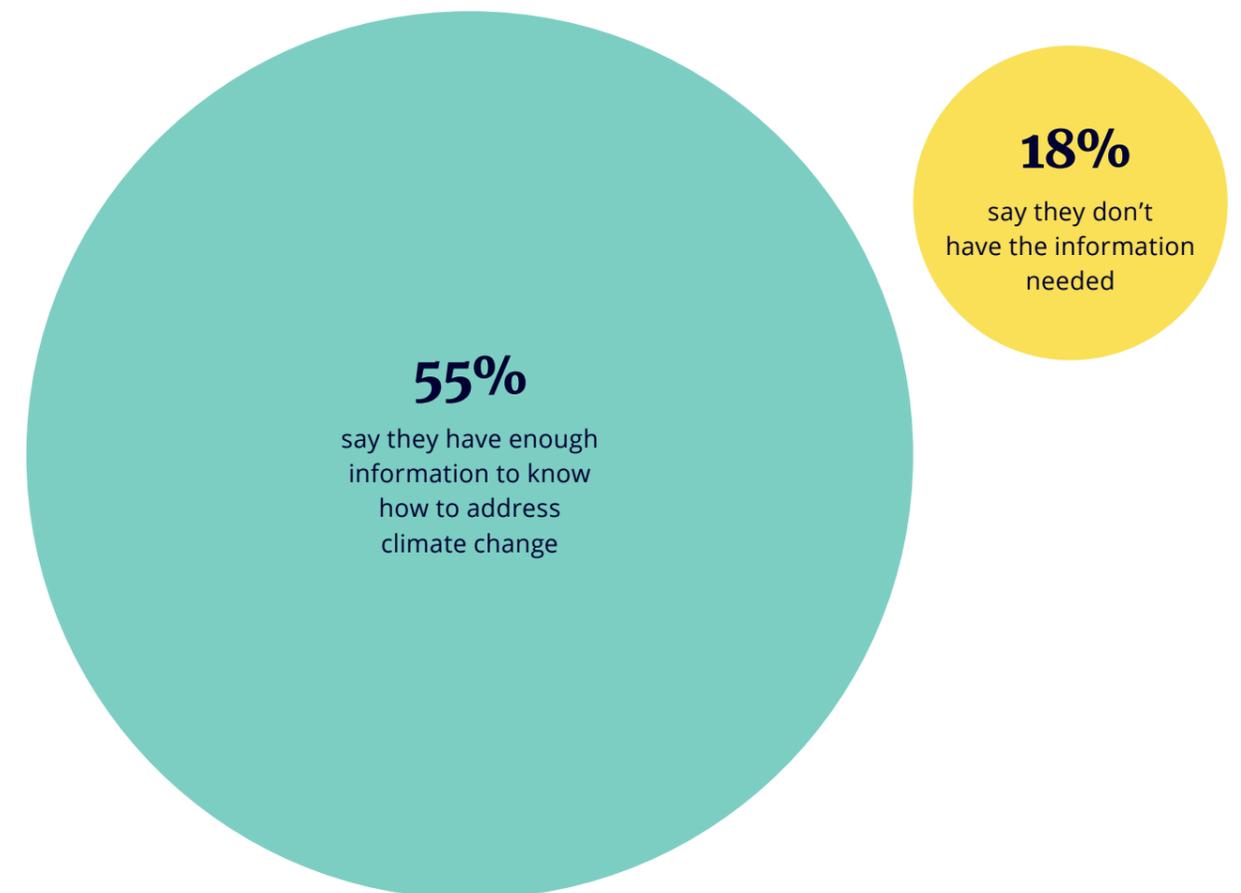
The public understand and recognise the importance of a project delivering social and economic benefits. If a project cannot be net zero but delivers economic or social value, 54% say government should support it while only 10% are opposed to this.



Trust in decision makers is apathetic, but has strong foundations

Around 40% of people trust local councils and government to make the right decisions on projects, compared to 23% who don't. However, 32% don't agree or disagree, while 8% are unsure as to whether they trust decision makers to address climate change.

Knowledge among the public is mixed but remains relatively high



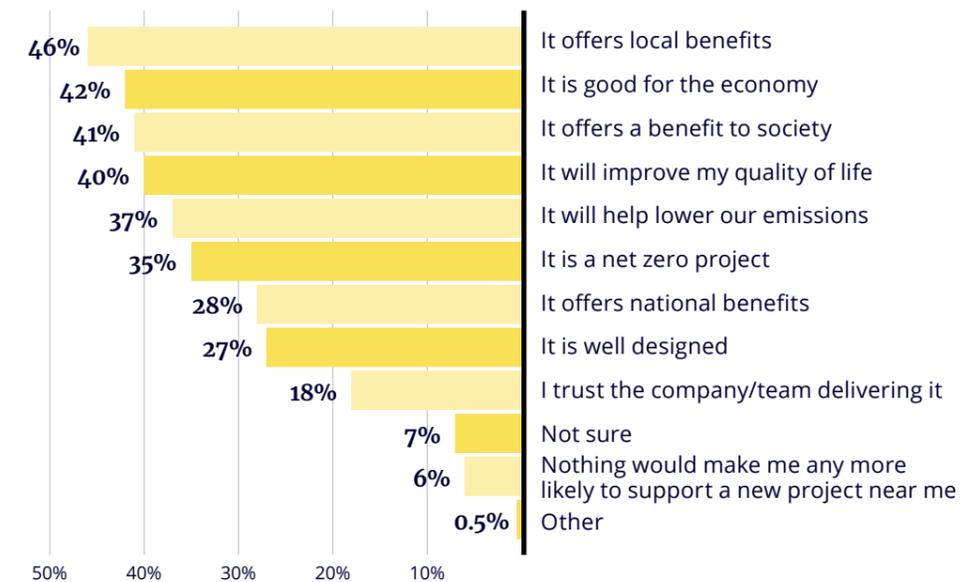
Section 7

Climate change will be used to oppose projects, but individual concerns are still more pressing

People will consider net zero as a reason to oppose a new infrastructure project but would prioritise other concerns such as benefits to the local area, society and economy and individual quality of life.

People support projects for localised, tangible reasons, only 6% would oppose any new project

The graph shows the priorities listed for supporting a new local project. Net zero is ranked 6th, with local benefits, the economy, quality of life and helping lower emissions ranked higher. National benefits, project design and trusting the company or team delivering it sit below net zero when it comes to people supporting a project.



Liberal Democrat voters are the most likely to support a project because it is net zero (51%), compared to Labour (40%), Conservative (33%) and Green Party (33%) voters.

Individual impacts top the list of reasons people will oppose projects

People consider impacts to their daily lives important when objecting to a new infrastructure project in the local area. Noise, visual impacts and construction disruption sit above net zero as a motivation.

- Noise – 43%
- Visual – 34%
- Construction disruption – 30%
- Cannot be net zero – 29%
- No reason for objecting to a project – 18%

People in London, the South East and North West (35%) are most likely to oppose a project on the grounds of it not being net zero. People living in the North East and Northern Ireland are least likely to oppose a project on the grounds of net zero requirements (18% and 14% respectively).

Conclusions

Public attitudes to net zero are complex. There is a high level of understanding and support for achieving net zero, but context is key. People want to understand the benefits in relation to net zero but also how a project impacts them and their communities. Public ambition stretches beyond achieving net zero as a goal in itself and they grasp the wider narrative of new infrastructure projects.



Aside from the pandemic, healthcare and climate change are more of a priority for the public, sitting above social care and education, showing how important net zero is to the wider population.



The public are willing to take action in their personal lives to address climate change.



There is strong support for the UK becoming a global leader in achieving net zero and the public firmly believe our elected representatives should be bolder.



While individuals will accept direction from government, this needs to be balanced with the impact on their day to day lives.



There is no agreement among the public on how to pay for the transition to net zero, which changes across political views.



The public understand the need for new projects in terms of their benefits. People feel all projects should endeavour to be net zero, whether that is directly through the project or by offsetting carbon emissions and the narrative around this should be stronger.



The public grasp the need for new infrastructure and major projects and understand that there isn't a 'one size fits all' approach for net zero.



Public support for new infrastructure projects is localised. Often people will prioritise the direct impacts to them over the national picture.

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