



Net zero: agenda 2022

Jill Rutter and Tom Sasse

Introduction

2021 was dominated by Covid and the aftermath of Brexit. But also on the prime minister's agenda was net zero.

Early in his premiership, Boris Johnson confirmed that the UK would host the important COP26, originally scheduled for November 2020 – the Conference of the Parties (COP) being the five-yearly review of progress since the 2015 Paris climate accord. He was lucky: Covid forced a postponement of what threatened to be a global non-event in Glasgow, timed to coincide with the US election. A year's delay meant he could count on a more sympathetic US administration and, remarkably, the UK managed to host a relatively Covid-free conference and deliver a "pact",¹ which it claimed kept the chance of preventing a global temperature rise above 1.5 degrees "alive". (In practice, 1.5 looks undeliverable given what would need to happen to emissions over the next decade, but the tactic seems to be to use it to keep up pressure for action.)

In the run-up to COP26, which took place in October/November 2021, the government finally published its comprehensive net zero strategy,² alongside the much-delayed Treasury net zero review and the heat and building strategy. Other strategies – for transport decarbonisation and for reforming the energy system – had appeared in the summer. These documents put some flesh on the bones of the *10 Point Plan*³ the prime minister had unveiled the year before and give some indications of how the government would deliver not only its net zero target for 2050 but also its much more ambitious near-term target of reducing emissions by 78% by 2035, which it had passed into law in the summer.

However, 2021 also saw an emerging threat to the political consensus on action on climate change that has characterised British politics since Mrs Thatcher first identified global warming as a threat in a landmark speech to the Royal Society in 1988. (Although David Cameron faced substantial opposition to an expansion of onshore wind, that had not become opposition to action on climate change per se.) A new 'Net Zero Scrutiny Group'⁴ formed on the Conservative backbenches, with arch rebel Steve Baker MP as an organiser, with a mission to ask difficult questions about the costs of climate action and who should pay them, and how much action the UK should take relative to other countries. Its establishment has sparked into life a counter group – the 'Net Zero Support Group' set up by former energy minister Chris Skidmore to “demonstrate and maintain Conservative support for net zero carbon emissions and policies needed to deliver this”,⁵ which suggests this will be a live topic on the Conservative backbenches during 2022.

The risk for action on climate change is that, now 'Glasgow is done', the prime minister and Cabinet's focus switches elsewhere; that Treasury scepticism combined with fears about living standards and public expenditure delay action and that Whitehall drifts back to the familiar problems we identified in our 2020 report, *Net Zero: How to deliver the government's climate change targets*.⁶ In this short insight paper, we set out seven steps the government needs to take if it is serious about following through on the announcements and rhetoric of 2021 and putting the UK on the promised trajectory. Finally we look at parliament's role in holding the government to account for its performance.

The government has the opportunity to build on the momentum it created in 2021 and show that it is serious about delivering this prime ministerial priority. Below we set out some critical steps, but first the government needs to deal with the pressing issue of rising energy costs.

Recommendations in brief

Manage the immediate cost-of-living crisis

- The government needs to show it can manage the current energy price crisis, keeping its commitment to net zero while maintaining a secure and affordable energy supply.
- The government should set out how its approach to energy bills now fits with its long-term net zero vision.

Fill in the gaps in the net zero strategy

- The government should publish the outstanding strategy for agriculture and land use and publish the detailed emissions trajectories that underlie its net zero strategy.
- The government should convert high-level strategies into detailed action plans with dates.

Develop an approach to embedding net zero across all areas of government policy

- The government should publish and consult on the detail of its net zero test for public spending and how it intends to apply it. It should also develop a net zero test that applies across policies more generally.

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- The Treasury should produce a net zero tax strategy and routinely produce a net zero assessment of the Budget.
 - The government should produce a trade strategy to set out the principles it wants to guide its trade policy, and how net zero fits in; the forthcoming levelling-up white paper should set out how overlaps between the net zero and levelling-up agendas will be aligned.

Sort out net zero delivery and governance

- The prime minister must show that net zero remains a top priority for him.
- The COP26 team should be transformed into a standing net zero unit in the Cabinet Office.
- The government should review both the delivery architecture and capacity gaps in central and local government and in business.
- The government should establish effective forums for collaborating with business and local government.

Make good on its commitment to engage the public – and be honest with them

- The government should engage with the public about the costs and benefits of its net zero strategy. Departments should embed deliberative methods in their policy making.
- The government should develop a net zero communications strategy to help people to understand the changes it is proposing and why. It should also make convincing commitments to protect vulnerable households from the cost of future changes.

Produce a cross-government adaptation strategy

- The government should publish an adaptation strategy covering all departments and sectors and review responsibilities to ensure adaptation has enough clout within government. It should consider giving the Cabinet Office or the Treasury a bigger role.

Keep up the post-COP momentum in the remaining months of the UK presidency

- The UK and Egyptian COP presidencies should develop a joint lobbying strategy for raising the ambition of nationally determined contributions (NDCs), ensuring climate finance commitments are kept, and broadening and deepening the coalitions and initiatives launched at Glasgow.
- The UK government needs to be clear about how it will meet the commitments on climate finance it made in Glasgow, and address uncertainty over its aid budget.

In addition to the work the government should do, parliament also needs to actively hold it to account for progress on net zero and adaptation. Over the last two years, parliamentary committees have embarked on more rigorous scrutiny of government progress on net zero. They need to build on that and integrate both net zero and adaptation into their future work.

1. Manage the immediate cost-of-living crisis

The most immediate threat to the government's net zero agenda is the cost-of-living crisis, as soaring energy prices and rising inflation mean households face a major squeeze.

These rising costs are set to dominate the early part of this year and come to a head in April, which is when inflation is set to peak, there will be substantial new tax rises and the new energy price cap, which Ofgem will announce in February, will also come into effect. The expected rise in the price cap will come on top of the 12% rise that Ofgem already authorised in October of last year; and the Resolution Foundation has calculated that this will add around £600 to the typical household's annual energy bill.⁷

The government needs to show it can manage the current energy price crisis, maintaining its commitment to net zero while also meeting its other energy priorities of maintaining a secure and affordable energy supply. In the short term, it will need to try to cushion the impact of the energy price rise on vulnerable households and decide how far it wants to go in supporting households more generally. Discussions are continuing between the government and the energy suppliers and options under consideration appear to be:⁸

- **Scrapping or suspending the 5% VAT charge on domestic energy bills** – an idea supported by Labour, many in the business community and now Conservative backbenchers in the Net Zero Scrutiny Group. This would offer some help to all consumers but is unlikely to be a big-enough change to mitigate the size of the rise in costs for everyone. It would be costly and, as the prime minister has pointed out, poorly targeted; in fact, given the reduction would be in proportion to the size of someone's bill, it would be likely to offer the biggest benefit to some of those least in need of help. The government would also fear that even if it was brought in as a temporary change, it might prove difficult to reverse later.
- **Reforming green levies** (or scrapping them altogether). Robert Halfon MP and others have highlighted that green levies such as the Climate Change Levy are used to fund projects with questionable green credentials, such as the large Drax biomass facility in North Yorkshire. Some of these funds could be recouped to support consumers. The government could also decide to move the cost of supporting renewables from electricity consumers to general taxation. It is already looking at rebalancing taxes between gas (which does not bear this cost) and electricity (which does), because the current approach is inconsistent with its net zero aims.
- **Smoothing the price rise** – one idea is for the government to loan the energy industry funds to allow it to contain the immediate rise, to be paid back as a levy on future bills as market prices decline.

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- **Increasing targeted support to the fuel poor** – the government could increase the Warm Home Discount,⁹ which is paid to pensioners in receipt of pension credit and others deemed to qualify as part of a “broader group” identified by energy suppliers. This winter’s discount was £140. This would target support and therefore reduce the cost. But at the moment the discount is only paid in the winter – and so would not apply to an April price rise until the autumn – and is paid for through an obligation on electricity suppliers (that is, by other electricity consumers). If the government were minded to use this route, it would need to compensate the energy companies to prevent other bills increasing even more. But targeting would reduce the costs of any change: the Resolution Foundation calculated that a £200 reduction in the cap would cost £2.7 billion if applied to all consumers, but only £450 million if confined to universal credit recipients.¹⁰

The big challenge the government faces is to do something that is substantial enough to protect vulnerable consumers through what will be a very difficult period, while not detracting from its aim to reach net zero. Any major change will likely need to be funded through other measures, and the Treasury will be keen to avoid the risk of getting tied into future costs that are poorly targeted. Getting the response to the crisis right in the coming months will be critical to preserving political and public support for net zero policies.

Alongside any short-term package on energy bills, **the government should set out how its approach to energy bills now fits with its long-term net zero vision**. It has so far made a few comments suggesting that the current gas market crisis underlines the importance of reducing exposure to volatile global energy markets but has failed to address the concerns about the vulnerability of dependence on intermittent renewables. It has also notably eschewed any opportunity the current energy price crisis might have given to reinforce messages about energy use or energy efficiency – probably because of nervousness about what happened to previous ministers who suggested energy-saving measures. But accelerating the drive to insulate homes would be one of the most effective ways of increasing households’ resilience to changes in prices in the longer term and the government’s hesitation over this underlines again its lukewarm commitment to improving energy efficiency as part of its net zero strategy.¹¹

The government also needs to show how its approach helps deliver its longer-term vision of a net zero economy which is innovative and competitive, and able to spread economic opportunity more widely.

2. Fill in the gaps in the net zero strategy

There was one big missing element in the government’s net zero strategy:¹² it had nothing particular to say on agriculture and land use; the relevant section of the strategy contained only a vague aim to “get more farmers engaged in low-carbon farming practices”. This is a critical sector; it accounts for around 10% of UK emissions, and land use also accounts for a large proportion of the greenhouse gas we absorb from the atmosphere.

It is not clear why there is no strategy for this sector yet, although there have been reports of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) being put on special measures due to a lack of urgency, with a “tiger team” assembled to find the necessary cuts in emissions.¹³

The government is reforming the system of agricultural support – from one based primarily on land area payments to a payment for public goods (in England – although the direction of travel in the other nations of the UK is similar if not so radical nor so fast) and both contributing to achieving the government’s net zero goals and promoting adaptation will be public goods. On 6 January the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs set out more detail on the two new agricultural support schemes that are likely to do much of the heavy lifting in delivering large-scale environmental benefits: the Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery schemes (which will sit alongside the entry-level Sustainable Farming Incentive). The accompanying document on environmental outcomes said that these and other reforms would mean “we will decarbonise agricultural emissions by up to a total of 6 MtCO₂e per annum in Carbon Budget 6 (2033-2037) in England”.¹⁴

The success of the new support schemes is dependent on securing high levels of uptake from farmers and land managers. But **the government still needs to publish the outstanding net zero strategy for agriculture and land use**, and show how it intends it to interact with its 25-year environment strategy and the new system for payments to farmers.

But there are other gaps in the net zero strategy that need to be filled in. Second, **the government needs to publish the detailed emissions trajectories that underlie its net zero strategy** so that it is possible to scrutinise whether the government is on track or not. The Climate Change Committee has called for this¹⁵ and it is important to see what assumptions the government is making to underpin its plans. There is some uncertainty – and the government itself published three different scenarios for 2035 in the net zero strategy – but it should be able to give an indication of where it expects reductions to come from.

The government’s net zero strategy was criticised for its heavy dependence on technology to deliver its net zero targets and downplaying the need for significant behavioural change. That presents a significant source of risk to the government’s ability to achieve its targets, so it would be good to know both what the government’s assumptions about when these new technologies will be available to deploy at scale are, and what its contingency plans are if those assumptions prove over-optimistic.

Third, **the government needs to convert high-level strategies into detailed action plans with dates**. This is important because so much of the strategy depends on actions not by central government but by businesses and those who regulate them. Business needs to know when the government expects changes to come in. Those plans would benefit from being developed by government in partnership with business – and with local government as well. Local authorities will have a major part to play in two key

strands of the net zero strategy: the heat and building strategy, particularly housing retrofit; and the transport decarbonisation strategy, for promoting active travel as well as managing the roll-out of on-street charging networks where they are needed.

While the net zero strategy acknowledged the important role local government would play, its proposals for strengthening joint working were underwhelming. A final critical enabler is a plan to ensure that necessary skills are available, following through on the work of the Green Jobs Taskforce¹⁶ last year.

These detailed action plans should also reduce the risk of stop–start policies that have bedevilled the government’s attempts to deliver its climate change goals in the past, and which it does not appear to have shaken off yet. In recent weeks, the government has announced both a significant reduction in the grants available for the purchase of electric cars and a watering down of any obligation on public and work car parks to incorporate charging points. Dates do not mean the government’s plans are set in aspic – the pace of technological development can render earlier plans rapidly redundant, as the government found with the extreme generosity of its solar feed-in tariff – but to give business a degree of certainty with which to invest, the government should set out dates, with set review periods where needed, and an indication of what might cause them to change track.

3. Develop an approach to embedding net zero across all areas of government policy

The net zero strategy contained a commitment to apply a net zero test to public spending and in the 2021 Budget the chancellor committed to add net zero to the remit of the National Infrastructure Commission. But these in themselves are not guarantees of making sure that government policy is consistent with the government’s own net zero strategy. It was these apparent inconsistencies that complicated the run-up to COP26 – with controversy about the go-ahead for the coalmine in Cumbria, the dropping of climate-change clauses from the Australia trade deal, the premature termination of the Green Homes Grant and the reduction in Air Passenger Duty (APD) on domestic flights. There have also been questions asked about how a record road-building programme is consistent with net zero.¹⁷

First, **the government needs to publish and consult on the detail of its net zero test for public spending and how it intends to apply it.** The net zero strategy contained a commitment to do this – but no detail on what it looks like. In the past, the government has claimed that individual items of spending that look incompatible with its climate change strategy are acceptable because they are part of an overall portfolio of measures that will deliver the target – for instance, large roadbuilding schemes are approved because, taken individually, they make up only a “negligible” percentage of the UK’s overall carbon budget.¹⁸

That was easier to argue when the strategy was to reduce emissions by 80% rather than achieve net zero – something that has reportedly changed mindsets within government. But a clear test and a process around the test would give confidence that the government is assuring itself before it makes commitments that its policies are compatible with its net zero plans. It needs to avoid the pitfalls of previous tests that have ended up as rather meaningless compliance box-ticking exercises, and be something that forces the government to confront potential contradictions with its net zero strategy before decisions are made.

Second, **the government needs to develop a net zero test that applies across policies more generally.** There are other areas of government policy that also need to be subjected to a net zero test. Departments are already required to produce an estimate of the impact on carbon emissions from any regulatory change requiring a regulatory impact assessment – but, beyond raising awareness in the department, it is unclear what use is made of this. The government is currently consulting on reform of the Better Regulation Framework.¹⁹ The only explicit mention the consultation makes of net zero is whether net zero impacts should be excluded from the measurement of business impact (as building safety measures have been since Grenfell). That makes sense since some of the government's net zero goals will need to be achieved through regulation, which will impose costs on business. But the government needs to explicitly address how it plans to square its better regulation and net zero ambitions to avoid them pulling in the opposite direction.

An early test of the government's ability to square net zero with its other priorities will come when it finally publishes its long-awaited levelling-up white paper. Some of the biggest advocates for net zero have been mayors who see big job opportunities – as seen on Teesside – from the green economy. Empowering local leaders to deliver net zero in line with local concerns and priorities should be a major tool for levelling up.

Another area to look at is tax policy. The Climate Change Committee has now called on **the Treasury to produce a net zero tax strategy**²⁰ – echoing a proposal we made before COP26.²¹ That means looking at the existing tax system to make sure it does not send the wrong signals (the net zero strategy included a call for evidence on addressing one of the biggest anomalies, which is the relative tax treatment of domestic gas and electricity), but the chancellor barely mentioned net zero in his October 2021 Budget.²² He introduced two measures that could be described as helping the government meet its net zero goals: a one-year business-rate exemption for green building improvements, which had been requested by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI); and an increased rate of APD on long-haul flights.

But he also cut APD on domestic flights to boost connectivity within the UK – even where train alternatives were feasible. Even though the government could have argued that emissions from the additional flights that the policy would induce would have been contained by domestic aviation's presence in the UK Emissions Trading Scheme, the government produced no assessment of the net zero impacts of the Budget. So

an additional requirement would be for **the Treasury to routinely produce a net zero assessment of the Budget** (or ask the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) or the Climate Change Committee to do it).

The government has updated the framework for the National Infrastructure Commission²³ to include net zero – but also needs to look at the remit of other regulators to ensure they are all aligned with the government’s net zero goals.

Finally, the government needs to look at its foreign policy. One of the issues that hampered government credibility in the run-up to COP26 was the decision to suspend the commitment to 0.7% gross national income (GNI) spending on aid. One of the trickiest issues at the COP was the failure of developed countries to make good on the commitments on climate finance they made at Copenhagen over a decade earlier. **So the government needs to be clear about how it will meet the commitments on climate finance it made in Glasgow**, if it wants to maintain credibility on a key pledge from that conference.

The government has also attracted a lot of criticism for failing to include any significant provisions on climate change in its trade deal with Australia (although it does appear to have included some with the more pro-climate-action government of New Zealand). **The government should produce a trade strategy to set out the principles it wants to guide its trade policy, and how net zero fits in.**²⁴ In the absence of that, it gives the impression that its sole priority is securing deals. There is no point handing advantages in trade agreements to other countries which do not impose as stringent net zero commitments on their domestic producers.

4. Sort out net zero delivery and governance

As the government moves from developing plans into delivery, it needs to make sure that it has in place the right structures for making decisions centrally, and for translating its intentions into action.

The current decision-making structure involves the overall lead staying in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). There are two Cabinet committees²⁵ – mirroring the structures that the government has used for managing both Brexit and Covid – with a small and tightly focused Climate Action Strategy Committee, chaired by the prime minister, and a much bigger ‘implementation’ committee, chaired not by the current business secretary, but by the COP26 president, Alok Sharma, who remains in the Cabinet. The Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit also has net zero on its radar as one of the prime minister’s top priorities, although it also has four other priorities (including the flagship ‘levelling up’) so it is unclear how much capacity it will have to focus on it, although this does mean that net zero regularly features on the agenda of the Government Priorities Delivery Committee, which the prime minister chairs. Many of the last details of the net zero strategy appeared to have been hammered out between No. 10 and the Treasury.

There were stories, immediately after the conclusion of the Glasgow conference, that the prime minister might be contemplating creating a new net zero department for Sharma to lead – but nothing has materialised so far.

As we have argued before, the prime minister's leadership is essential for net zero to be delivered.²⁶ There is a risk that, now that the focus has moved away from the immediacy of the Glasgow conference, the prime minister focuses his energy on his other priorities – levelling up, dealing with public sector backlogs, education and skills and managing both the pandemic and unfinished Brexit business. But **it is critical that the prime minister shows that net zero remains an important priority for him**, and that he wants to resolve the issues left incomplete in the net zero strategy and is prepared to go on making the political case for action on net zero.

This also means looking again at the adequacy to support decision making and progress chasing within government. At the moment, Sharma will be supported in his committee work by his Cabinet Office COP26 team on the international side (his team will reduce from 220 in the run-up to the COP to around 140–150 FTE in order to take forward commitments, the reduction reflecting the fact it no longer needs to organise a big international conference),²⁷ and on the domestic side by officials from the Cabinet Office who act as the secretariat to the Cabinet committees and the business department, as well as by the Delivery Unit. It is not clear what happens to the COP unit after the Sharm-el-Sheikh conference late in 2022.

There remains a strong case for transforming the COP26 team, over time, into a standing net zero unit in the Cabinet Office, to support both domestic and international action, bringing in expertise from other departments. This could also take over the Delivery Unit's capability on net zero. At the moment, net zero is on the agenda for quarterly stocktakes by the small Government Priorities Delivery Committee, which the prime minister chairs, and it is important to maintain that prime ministerial interest and be prepared to intervene to help when Sharma – or his successor once his COP presidency duties are done – needs to knock heads together.

The final missing elements are to do with delivery. There are some significant gaps, but also innovative delivery models emerging. For example, the Future Homes Hub²⁸ has just been set up as an industry-led initiative, collaborating with government departments to support the whole sector's transition to meet the Future Homes Standard and subsequent steps to net zero in a joined-up way. BEIS is consulting on the future design of the energy system. But there is, as yet, no architecture in place to help support the more challenging housing retrofit programme, nor to co-ordinate the roll-out of electric vehicle infrastructure, nor to translate the government's green jobs strategy into a pipeline of people with the right skills available when they are needed. The government also needs to work with businesses on the support they – particularly small businesses – need to convert pledges to net zero into action. That needs to start with both clear guidance on what net zero means and a robust system of corporate transparency and audit to ensure claims can be accredited. Some progress was made on this at COP26, but it will take focus to ensure it happens quickly.

As an urgent priority, **the government needs to review both the delivery architecture and capacity gaps in central and local government and in business, to ensure that the right decision-making capabilities are in place to turn the government’s ambitions into change on the ground. It needs to establish effective collaborative machinery with business and local government, both of whom have critical roles to play.** The government needs to make clear where it needs to take responsibility, but also understand where it has a role in simply facilitating others to deliver. But any intermediate structures put in place need to both be able to discuss and transmit priorities to those who will ultimately be responsible for implementation, but also ensure that their concerns about potential blockages and barriers are fed back to those making policies.

5. Make good on its commitment to engage the public – and be honest with them

To date, the climate change debate in the UK has been characterised by a wide political consensus on the need for action. That seems to be shared by a growing proportion of the population as the salience of climate change and the environment has risen to unprecedented levels.

But despite that, there are signs that that political consensus is facing a bigger challenge than it has at any time in the past 30 years. The formation on the government backbenches of the Net Zero Scrutiny Group in recent months contains the implicit threat that the government can no longer take unified Conservative party support for action for granted.

The government has left itself vulnerable to the criticisms of the Net Zero Scrutiny Group by failing to engage in a wide-ranging public debate before it enacted its net zero target and passing the sixth carbon budget into law after only a brief parliamentary debate. It has been very reluctant to talk about the potential lifestyle consequences in the move to net zero. The net zero strategy was criticised by the Climate Change Committee for its failure to talk about behaviour change in any meaningful way – indeed the whole emphasis in the net zero strategy was that technology would enable the net zero target to be met, with no significant impact on current lifestyles. The strategy was even quieter on measures such as active travel – modal shifts from cars to walking and cycling – than the transport decarbonisation strategy published in July. On flying, the message was that the search was on to find a way of “guilt-free flying” and the whole issue of possible dietary shifts went unmentioned.

The Citizens’ Assembly on Climate Change,²⁹ commissioned by six parliamentary select committees in 2020, showed that there was a greater public appetite for change than the government assumed in its strategy, and some demand management measures (for example in energy efficiency – where new measures are a big omission in the net zero strategy) are critical to reducing the costs of transition.

Nevertheless, the net zero strategy³⁰ set out six principles for supporting the economic transition, including making the green choice, the easy choice and empowering people and business to make their own choice. Principle 5 recognised the importance of “motivating and building public acceptability for major changes” and the final principle was to “present a clear vision of how we will get to net zero and what the role of business and people will be”.

The challenge from the government’s backbenches gives this added urgency: **the government needs to engage with the public about the costs and benefits of its net zero strategy and it needs to be honest with the public about where there will need to be behavioural changes** (particularly if some of its more optimistic technology bets fail to pay off). It needs a much more active and high-profile approach to public communications, helping people to understand the changes it is proposing and why. It should develop a communications strategy, and alongside this departments should embed deliberative methods in their approaches to developing policy.

One of the key messages from the citizens’ assembly was that any transition had to be fair. The government has done a lot to emphasise the positive side of net zero – and has focused on the way in which net zero job opportunities can benefit areas in need of ‘levelling up’. But it has yet to say anything much on the converse side of the net zero transition – on ensuring that those who can least afford to lose are properly supported. The Treasury net zero review,³¹ published alongside the net zero strategy, made clear that targeted measures would be the best way to compensate affected households as the costs and impacts were likely to be so variable, particularly from the changes to home heating, but argued that it was not possible to set out what that compensation might look like before the decision was made between heat pumps and hydrogen networks.

But if it is to maintain support for its strategy, **the government must make convincing commitments to protect vulnerable households from the cost of future changes**. Otherwise it risks undermining the case for action within the parliamentary party, and losing more general public support for its strategy.

6. Produce a cross-government adaptation strategy

Action on net zero does not preclude the need for action on adaptation to cope with already inevitable climate change – whether on flooding to cope with more intense rainfall or on building infrastructure resilience to higher temperatures, or helping agriculture adapt to changing seasonal patterns. The extensive damage from Storms Arwen and Barra across Scotland and the north of England was yet another reminder of how the UK’s housing and infrastructure are poorly equipped for extreme weather events.

The Climate Change Committee has been very critical that adaptation planning has gone backwards in recent years, despite the focus on net zero. In its assessment published in June 2021 it stated: “The UK is less prepared for the changing climate now than it was when the previous risk assessment was published five years ago.”³²

The Treasury partly justified its decision to reject additional net borrowing for net zero through the costs coming generations would bear of adapting to the already inevitable consequences of climate change.

A lot of government effort last year went into producing its net zero strategy. **This year, the government needs to put a similar effort into producing a cross-government adaptation strategy.**

The government also needs to look at the governance around adaptation. The policy lead currently lies with Defra, which is traditionally one of the lower-profile government departments – but also one at the moment with a massive post-Brexit policy agenda on both agriculture reform and the environment. It would make sense to move the lead on adaptation into the centre of government – particularly if the COP26 team morph into a net zero unit, which should also take over responsibility for adaptation. If the policy lead on net zero stays with the business department, it might make sense for the Treasury to lead on adaptation since it is the ultimate spend-to-save policy.

7. Keep up the post-COP momentum in the remaining months of the UK presidency

Although Glasgow appeared to be the climax of the UK's COP presidency, it was in fact the start of a year as COP president, with the UK due to hand over to Egypt at COP27 in Sharm-el-Sheikh in November this year. One of the notable achievements of Glasgow was to raise the importance of the 2022 conference as a chance to have a second bite at raising declared NDCs to the levels required to maintain the possibility of containing the global temperature rise to under 1.5 degrees. It was that commitment to come back a year later – rather than wait the normal five years for the next review – that enabled the 2021 conference to conclude that it had kept 1.5 degrees alive, although in the words of Sharma “on life support”. In reality, the changes in the emissions trajectory by the end of the decade look implausible, and events since Glasgow, not least the lack of progress on the Biden plan in the US, do not suggest much momentum going into 2022.

The UK – working with the Egyptian presidency designate – needs to find a way to reinject momentum into the run-up to COP27.³³ There are some possibilities – an Australian election is due later this year, which may lead to a change of government and potential change of direction there – **but the presidencies need a joint lobbying strategy for raising the ambition of NDCs.**

But there is other work to do as well. **The top priority has to be ensuring that the pledges on climate finance finally come through.** The UK weakened its authority in the run-up to COP26 by its decision to cut its own aid programme (although it has said that on pre-Omicron forecasts it was on track to restore aid back to 0.7% of GDP by 2024–25).³⁴

The second achievement of Glasgow was to complete some of the technical work unfinished at the Paris conference in 2015 – most notably completing the Paris rulebook and commitments on transparency. But it also saw a spawning of new commitments to action agreed by coalitions of countries and by different sectors. These were the big announcements of the first week of the conference before the focus changed to negotiating the texts in the second week. **Those coalitions and initiatives need to be broadened and deepened during the period up to COP27.**

These new coalitions have the potential to lead change. But momentum after Glasgow needs to be maintained across three fronts. First, there were some key countries missing from some of the coalitions – so new countries need to be encouraged where possible to join in those initiatives. Second, the high-level commitments made by those coalitions need to be translated into concrete proposals to act. And third, those proposals need to be turned into delivery.

But finally, just as the publication of the net zero strategy for domestic action gave the UK momentum going into COP26 – being able to point to an ambitious domestic plan – during 2022 **the government needs to show that its commitments were not just for the COP and that it is capable of converting its plans into politically feasible action.**

Parliament needs to hold the government to account for progress on net zero and adaptation

In the last couple of years, parliament has begun to subject government to much better scrutiny over its actions on climate change and explore the space for future action. It was House of Commons parliamentary select committees that came together to convene the citizens' assembly mentioned earlier and in recent months the Business, Energy and Select Committee³⁵ has launched inquiries on net zero governance, net zero and the United Nations climate summits, and decarbonising homes, as well as two further ones on energy policy – making a total of five out of 12 current inquiries. Meanwhile the Environmental Audit Committee has started to convene sessions with the current COP president, Alok Sharma, bringing in the chairs of other House of Commons select committees. It too has a long list of net zero inquiries on its agenda.³⁶

Meanwhile the House of Lords has established a new dedicated Environment and Climate Change Committee, chaired by Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Parminter, and has three current inquiries open focusing both on the domestic delivery of the COP commitments and on the role of behaviour change.³⁷

This upsurge in committee scrutiny is very welcome, but needs to extend to other relevant departmental select committees, which should ensure that they regularly scrutinise individual departments' progress against their net zero commitments. Committee activity should also start to focus on approaches to adaptation. And just as departments need to integrate net zero into their policy development and delivery across the board, so committees have an important role in calling out inconsistencies in government policy.

In this, committees should be willing to draw on analysis from the Committee on Climate Change, which has made clear that it expects to focus more in the future on the government's delivery of its plans, now that its advice on the sixth carbon budget has been accepted. Its annual progress report should trigger inquiries on government performance across all committees.

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About the authors

Jill Rutter

Jill is a senior fellow at the Institute for Government. She directed the Institute's work on better policy making and arm's-length government, and Brexit. She is an experienced former senior civil servant, having worked in HM Treasury, Number 10 and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

Tom Sasse

Tom is an associate director at the Institute for Government. His research has covered government outsourcing, civil service reform and policy making, including recent work on net zero and the coronavirus crisis. He also delivers the Institute's training programme on how government works.

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 +44 (0) 20 7747 0400  +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

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**Institute for Government, 2 Carlton Gardens
London SW1Y 5AA, United Kingdom**

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