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Unknown

Connecting for positive change.

Nilam

Hello, and welcome to the first episode of Net Zero Talks Podcast Series brought to you by Innovate UK KTN. I'm Nilam Banks Knowledge Transfer Manager for Place, and the lead for the Net Zero Places Innovation Network, which is a two-year flagship programme dedicated to supporting local and regional authorities and agencies to connect, collaborate, inform, share experiences and lessons learned in order to adopt innovation and level up across the UK. Before I introduce our guests today, let me tell you more about the podcast series and the innovation network. The Net Zero Talks Podcast Series has been created to hear from the experts and local authorities on the challenges to reaching net zero. So basically, we work with authorities to help identify the challenges to meet net zero, promote these challenges to engage innovators across sectors and collaborate with public buying organisations to make sure the solutions are procurement ready. Our goal is to provide practical insights into different topics on how to achieve net-zero in places. Also, before deep diving into the topic today, if you haven't already, please go to Innovate UK KTN website through the link in the description and sign up to receive the newsletters and updates of all of our activities. You'll also find out more about future episodes of this podcast series there too. In this episode, we ask our guests what are the key challenges for local authorities in meeting net zero, and what can be done to support them? In this discussion today, let me introduce you to our host Kezia Williamson, Head of Place at Innovate UK KTN and our special guests today, Patrick Allcorn, Head of Local Net Zero Team at the Department of Energy and Industry Strategy and Katy Greenhalgh, who's at Leicestershire County Council and is the Environment and Zero Carbon Programme Lead. So over to you, Kezia today.

Kezia

Thanks, Nilam. As I was introduced, I'm Kezia Williamson, Head of Place at Innovate UK KTN. My role is to connect national and regional innovation and encourage the distribution of economic and societal wellbeing across the UK. This means doing activities in places for the benefit of those places, just like the Net Zero Places Innovation Network. Patrick and Katy, thank you very much for joining us today. Before we start, would you like to take a minute to introduce yourself to our listeners? Katy, would you like to go first?

Katy

Yes, hello, everybody. I'm Katy Greenhalgh, Environment and Net Zero Carbon Lead at Leicestershire County Council. My role is really to oversee delivery of environmental and net-zero objectives within the county and look at how we can accelerate the pace and scale of delivery.

Nilam

Brilliant. And Patrick?

Patrick

Hello, everyone. I'm Patrick Allcorn, I am Head of Local Net Zero Team in Bayes, where we are looking at how all of the different net zero programmes can be delivered in places and supporting community groups, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships across England and the devolved administration's beyond that, on tackling their challenges on net zero and supporting their contributions to the national ambition on net zero.

Kezia

Brilliant. Thank you. So let's start with the big picture then, what do you see as the biggest overarching challenge for local authorities in meeting net zero? Perhaps Patrick, we start with you for the big picture and then we can go down to the practical of what Katie thinks in reality.

Patrick

So I think I think the biggest overarching issue at the moment is scale. I say that because it leads down to a number of the smaller component problems. But at the moment, local government doesn't have the capability and capacity, it doesn't have the finance and it doesn't have the planning or pipeline of projects to attract investment at scale. So there is a dependency on either government grant or one off commercial projects that the local authority can take forward at any one time. And that means that innovation, commercial funding, and real systems change is very, very difficult to get to because everyone is doing just a very tiny part of the problem at any one time. So the ability to scale up, either through working across bigger areas, creating aggregated programmes and projects, unlocking that opportunity to draw in commercial funding, I think is the biggest challenge that local authorities face in tackling net zero.

Kezia

Katy, does that resonate with you?

Katy

Yeah, I would completely agree with that. I think this is a really challenging space for local authorities and I think you need to combine that with the fact that net zero is just one of a whole range of services and functions and statutory duties that a local authority has to face. Particularly recently, there's been some very urgent short-term priorities for local authorities to address so COVID, the war in Ukraine, cost of living crisis, you know, these are huge challenges for local authorities, and kind of often take the immediate priority. So I think there's a challenge for us to look at how we ensure that tackling climate change and achieving net zero remains a high priority now, for the next decade, in the face of these other more short term and immediate challenges. I think if you combine that with looking at what the actual role of the local authority is, I know that there's, you know, wide acceptance that local authorities play a really integral role in achieving net zero. But if you look at kind of an areas emissions, only about 1 to 2% of those are actually emitted by the local authority, there's maybe 30 to 40%, that we have a significant level of control or influence over. So it leaves a huge proportion of emissions, which we're relying on engagement or supporting others to take action. And I think that's quite a challenge, especially, you know, going back to Patrick's point looking at how we shape that investment and bringing together these packages of work. It's challenging when you look at the specific role that the local authority

has to play within that. I think that's before you even get down to some of the practical issues, you know, we're looking at supply chain capacity, skills, the timeframe to deliver some of these really significant programmes of work. So there's a whole range of things that come together, I think, to make this a really complex issue.

Kezia

Yeah, it sounds very overwhelming when you frame it like that all at once. So give me the good news? What's working? Well, what's what's working in your favour at the moment, Katy?

Katy

Well, I think we have made some really good progress in recent years. So you'll remember a couple of years ago, there was the kind of wave of climate emergencies that came about. So it is recognised now that climate change is a key priority. And it's often core to local authorities, strategic plans, and lots of authorities have produced net zero strategies and action plans. So it is seen as a priority, which I think is great. We've also seen the support from central government. So particularly in programmes like the Domestic Retrofit Funding that's coming out of Bayes. So I think that you know, that kind of cash boost has really helped us to accelerate what we're doing, and look at scaling up and delivering a wider range of programmes to support net zero. But there's still that question of scale, linking back to what Patrick was saying earlier, we're retrofitting maybe 300 homes in Leicestershire this year. We need to look at how we retrofit 300,000 over the next decade. So it links back to that question of scalability and securing that significant level of investment needed.

Kezia

Patrick thinking across all the different local authorities, what do you think is going well? Where do you see the sort of progress being made?

Patrick

Well, as Katy says, I think the growth in ambition, politically and locally has been immense over the last three years. And again, as Katy says, some of that has been slightly pushed back because of COVID, cost of living, those sorts of issues. Although, I would argue that a lot of this work has the potential to have a major impact on the cost of living. So warmer homes, reducing energy bills, renewables, local renewables, potentially providing alternatives to oil and gas from Russia. So there are plenty of crossovers in this space. I think what we've seen though, is an excellence in individual places in tackling parts of the problem. So you'll see places that have done really well on heat networks or really well on other elements of decarbonisation, so cities taking forward EV charging infrastructure or retrofit programmes and really getting partnerships and developing those. The work that Bristol has done around City Leap, the work Nottingham has done around domestic housing, the work that the North East has done around mine water heating and the opportunity to repurpose mines for heating communities. There's a really, really big movement and people keep talking about 1000 flowers blooming and I think that's true. I think the issue with that is that no one can see all 1000 flowers and so we're picking off parts of the problem but we're not solving the whole of the problem all in one go. So, you know, it's a really interesting space at the moment, because everywhere is taking forward something and doing it really well. But how do you make all of that add up to a national outcome?

Kezia

Yeah. How do you do that? Got any thoughts?

Patrick

Well, I think you know, so the work that we're doing here through KTN and spreading that knowledge, the work that we've done with energy systems catapult on net zero go and creating an online platform for local government to share best practice. I think, the work that APSE and the LGA and ADEPT do on knowledge sharing and co working. So a lot of that will significantly accelerate because if you start to share legal documents, if you're starting to do joint procurements, if you're starting to look at how you work together, as the three cities in the West Midlands are doing or the West Midlands Combined Authority, you start to increase the capacity in a single local authority by working across two or three, and therefore you have more bodies, the scale of your ambition goes up, because you're covering instead of 300,000 houses, you're now looking at a million homes, and we're starting to see those partnerships. But it is all quite nascent at the moment, there's a lot of trial and error. So we have to keep sharing that best practice and talking to people and bringing people together. And that I think is the biggest opportunity.

Kezia

Well, you're talking my language, if you start talking about collaboration, so KTN, all in favour of that. How are you seeing that develop Katy, for Leicestershire? Are you seeing those kinds of partnerships developing? Where are you in that journey?

Katy

Yeah, I think it's so essential for us to work together. Not everyone can be an early adopter, not everyone can, can take the risks and it's really important to learn the lessons that those organisations go through to make projects more deliverable, reduce that risk and the pain of setting up these sorts of projects. So, I think that's really essential and networks like this will be incredibly valuable in sharing that knowledge and working together. Something that we're trying to champion in Leicestershire, we've recognised, particularly as a two tier area, we can't deliver this alone as a county council, we need to work with our neighbouring authorities and the districts within the council. There's no point in us duplicating efforts, you know, we can have a much greater impact if we do work together, we can have a greater reach, and not just within the public sector. As I said before, there's a limit to the control and influence that authorities can have, it's going to be really important for us to work with the private sector, all sectors and residents to create change and to drive this forward and share that knowledge and learning.

Kezia

I mean, you've got me and Patrick sitting here with open ears. So is there anything in particular that you think is missing from this picture of support that you've got at the moment?

Katy

I think I'd like to see knowledge share on a very practical level. So as Patrick was saying earlier, even looking at sharing contracts, and you know, some of these Project Setup phases can be very expensive and time consuming. So the more that we can share specific practical documents and processes, I think that's going to be incredibly beneficial save time

and mean that we can deliver more efficiently and bring projects forward more quickly. So I think that very specific and practical knowledge share, as well as hearing more generally about projects being delivered and the benefits of those, I think sharing the difficult bits would be really helpful.

Kezia

Yeah, we're hearing that message a lot, we want to hear not just the success stories, but the whole nitty gritty details of what happened along the way, perhaps what went wrong. How can we learn from that? So, yeah, I think we're seeing that too, from other voices, it's really getting into that practical detail now, is where we're at.

Katy

Yeah, and I think what didn't work is almost as useful as what has worked and can stop us using time up that could be spent developing up other options.

Patrick

I think, from our perspective, that's why we are working at the moment on net zero, go to limit it to local authorities, so that they have the security to create those relationships and to build that, wherever they are in the country through an online platform. But alongside that, we've also got the net zero hubs in England. So the five hubs that have capability and capacity paid for by Bayes, but employed by local authorities to support those individual officers in local authorities, help them develop project pipelines, help them understand what else is going on across the region, where there's join up. The final thing I'd say is that later, well, in June, we will have the first of the net zero forum meetings, which brings local government representation from across England, together with central government representation from half a dozen different departments or with a stake in net zero, to build the understanding between central government and local government around the barriers that they face the issues and try and work out how we can support each other, which in what is, a joint endeavour, but at the moment doesn't always feel that way from either side.

Kezia

Yeah. That's great to hear. Do you want to say anything more about the particular themes that you're looking at, for the National Forum, Patrick?

Patrick

Well, I think it comes back to the issues I think we talked about at the start. So the big, big issues that we're looking at, to start with in the forum will be things around the roles and responsibilities of local authority. So what is the expectation of national government on local authority delivery? There's a work strand there around finance, both in terms of streamlining, potential streamlining of government funding. So recent NAO, National Audit Office report, identified some 22 different funding streams in government to local government for net zero, which clearly carries some significant overhead costs for local authorities to access. But also in terms of blending finance, so you know, attracting commercial investment, understanding where that is, and we're doing a piece of work with Connected Places Catapult at the moment, supported by core cities and London councils on understanding what asset classes and what investors are looking at, to bring investment to local authorities. So rather than just talking to the local authorities about what investment they need, talking to the other side, about what sort of projects, what sort of programmes, what sort of ambition they need to see

before they would consider investing. The capability and capacity issue, the knowledge sharing issue, all of that side of things is a third element of it. Then I think, what is probably fourth on the list, but may need to be first in terms of the actions that local authorities take is around the data and reporting. So creating an evidence base, creating local area energy plans or pathways that bring together the buildings, the transport and the energy systems and you really understand how those three interact in a place so that you can design and develop practical solutions. A little like Katy was saying earlier, you know, it has to happen on the ground, there's stuff on the ground already. You need to work through whatever that is, no local authority has a blank sheet of paper to go, this is what our net zero town or city or region will look like. So that data and reporting is really key, I think in terms of evidencing progress against the climate emergency motions and action plans but also against the national programme where we don't necessarily see local because our sectors are all national and so that interplay and ensuring we understand how that interacts with the carbon budgets is really important.

Kezia

Katy, do you want to respond, to say anything on that one?

Katy

No, I think those are all kind of useful points and that complexity and how cross cutting net zero is, you know, that is a significant challenge, it's transport is property, it's public engagement. Particularly being in a rural council, it's also the natural environment and how we best use land and engage with landowners, so it's got so many dimensions, there is so much complexity there. So anything that can help us to kind of cut across that and look at some of these facets together as a whole, I think will be really beneficial. I think particularly the local area and energy planning, that's a piece that we're trying to pull together in Leicestershire, and it's not cheap. But that's one of the initial barriers, paying for these big pieces of research and evidence gathering. But there's so much value in looking at how these different areas overlay and how electric vehicles will impact on how a property is heated. So many kinds of ways that that net zero connects, which just makes it even more interesting to deliver.

Kezia

So I feel like I've been on a little roller coaster already, just in this sort of really short time we've been chatting because it sort of started out we had these huge challenges, and I was thinking, Oh, it's too big, we can't do it. But actually hearing both of you speak more about, well, yes, it is a massive challenge but we've already got lots of support mechanisms in place, partnerships are developing, we're looking at these big cross cutting, we kind of know what the challenges are. And we can start to unpick those and unpick them collaboratively, you know, working together, so there's not one person trying to solve or one department even, trying to solve these challenges. So, I don't know I'm feeling a bit more optimistic now, you've brought me round. Hopefully that was your intention. Thinking about then, what would you like the listeners of the podcast to sort of take away from this? Looking at this big picture conversation? What's your takeaway message?

Patrick

So from my side, it's very easy to feel isolated. There aren't always many people in any one local authority, in any one place working on these issues. And so reach out to the networks,

there are lots and lots of different networks out there for local authority officers, for directors, for finance officers, there are membership organisations, I've mentioned a few. There's Net Zero Go, get involved, make connections, build the partnerships, not just locally, but across the sub regions, give your regional hub manager a call, introduce yourself, get to know the people, because there is a huge amount of support out there. I think the other thing is, all of that support now needs to pull in the same direction. So bringing one of our tasks as government, I think, is to try and bring all of those different organisations, third sector, business, innovation all together and put the combined weight and value of that into supporting the local authorities consistently and coherently. Because it's very easy for a counsellor to make a decision not to do something because there's conflicting advice. It's much harder for a counsellor to commit his counsel or her counsel to spending hundreds of 1000s, millions of pounds of taxpayers money on something that may or may not work as an innovation step, and to be at that forefront and to drive this agenda forward. So giving them the confidence to make the decisions that they need to make I think is really, really key.

Katy

Yeah, I think I would agree with that. I think this is a huge challenge, it's a huge global challenge. It's so cross cutting, it requires action from all sectors, all residents. So as a local authority officer that can sometimes feel overwhelming, and it can be a struggle, but I think we're all in it together. As Patrick said, there's loads of support available, there's loads of really good work underway. There's so much to learn from. So I think it's just holding on to those positives, and just keeping going, keep to delivering what we can and accelerating that activity wherever possible. So I feel quite positive in the journey that we're going along. We know that there's a huge support from the public as well and many, many people are willing to take action. So it's not just us delivering this alone, it's definitely a movement that we can continue to deliver together.

Kezia

Yeah, and I think that community engagement piece is something we're going to pick up as well going forward. Yeah, just to add to that, of course, I'm going to advocate everyone joins the Innovation Network from KTN, we're building this community to make sure we're getting these connections and this cross working. But I would also, you know, engage, as Patrick said, with the catapult activity, so whether that's the net zero goal from the Energy Systems Catapult or the Net Zero Navigator from the Connected Places Catapult, your Net Zero Hubs, all of this activity, we're working really hard to make sure we're all connected in the back, so you don't worry about that, you know, get connected to any one of these points and you should get access to the whole lot of it from there. I think it's probably about time to wrap up. Thank you very much, Patrick, and Katy, for joining us today. That was a really great discussion and I'm so pleased that you brought me back from the pit of despair to a real sense of optimism and hope for the future. Hope everyone else enjoyed the discussion as much as I did and I'll pass back over to Nilam to close this out.

Nilam

Thank you, Kezia and thank you so much for hosting this episode. And, again, Patrick and Katy, thanks for joining us. We couldn't do these podcasts without you guys. So thank you for listening. All the links are in the description. Don't forget to sign up to receive our newsletter and updates for the latest activities, which Kelsey mentioned, we'll also add the links to the other aspects that Patrick mentioned, so Net Zero Go and the Navigator tool and

other links to access to the net zero hubs. In the next episode, we will be discussing the importance of decarbonising buildings for net zero. So please join us next time and thank you all for following us and we hope you enjoyed this episode and we'll come back for more, until next time.

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