

PGES Energy Bulletin

8 September 2020

Success at COP26 starts at home: leading by example on net zero

Steve Holliday FREng FEI, Energy Institute President and former National Grid CEO reflects on this week's PGES event at which he spoke alongside Energy Institute CEO Louise Kingham OBE FEI and UKERC Director Rob Gross FEI.

Energy professionals in my experience are a pretty hard-headed bunch. They're engineers, technicians, scientists and economists, driven by the practicalities of what it takes to keep the electrons and molecules flowing to our homes, businesses and vehicles. I value their methodical, fact-based view of the world because it delivers for us all day-in-day-out, even in these exceptional times.

So when we survey the Energy Institute's members in the UK every year in our Energy Barometer, about their sector and the world around them, I listen. And this year's survey, focused on net zero and the impact of COVID-19 could not be better timed.

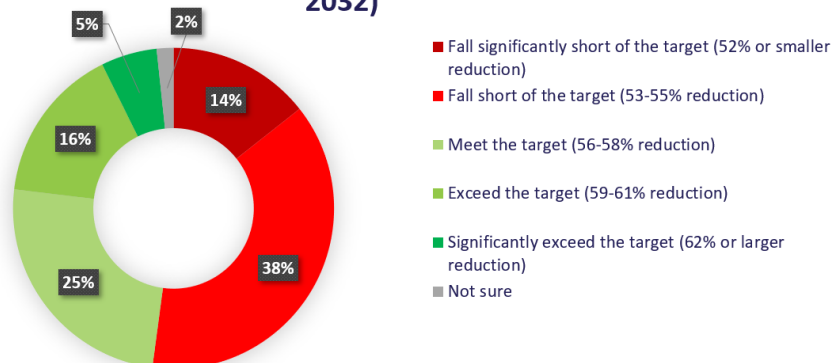
There's no doubt the UK has a strong track record as a climate leader. The Climate Change Act was in its day the first of its kind and upgrading the target to net zero last year in line with the science put us back in the vanguard.

I was privileged to have been at the helm of National Grid during what I now see as the first decade of that net zero journey. And progress getting renewables onto, and coal off, Britain's electricity grid has been astonishing.

But our survey published over the summer shows energy professionals are worried. Nine in ten of them believe the UK is currently off track for net zero by 2050; more than half of them say we're even off track for the target for 2030 without urgent policy action.

More than half do not even expect the UK to meet its fifth carbon budget (57% reduction in emissions compared to 1990 levels)

Expectations for meeting the UK fifth carbon budget (2028-2032)



More ambitious policies are needed and fast

In this endeavour, numbers matter. Zero is the goal, but emissions are still only down around 40% and the hardest work is yet to be done. Dates matter too. 2050 might sound like a long time away, but the lead times for technology development and deployment are lengthy. If we're to have a chance of net zero by the middle of the century, the 2020s really have to be the decade of delivery. Fortunately, the Energy Barometer contains help for ministers looking for solutions. Before anything else, our members prescribe the unfinished business of bringing the nation's buildings up to scratch. Energy efficiency is singled out as both the biggest missed opportunity of the past decade and the foremost option for plugging the emissions reduction gap for the 2030 target at least cost.

Furthermore, in the context of COVID-19, more members urge retrofitting existing housing stock than any other action for a resilient recovery, probably for the same reasons it's finding favour with ministers. It has nation-wide, job-creating potential, with long term environmental and social benefits.

In fact, our members overwhelmingly support calls for ministers to turn the discontinuity caused by the pandemic into the moment we get real about the climate threat and the shape of the future economy. Four in five agree with the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) that stimulus should be channelled into green industries and jobs, and support for emissions-intensive sectors should be contingent on action on climate change.

A 'green recovery' from COVID-19 could be the catalyst

Recommendations from Committee on Climate Change letter to the Prime Minister

The Government should...	% of respondents who agree/strongly agree
Ensure a just recovery regarding costs	87%
Capitalise on changed social norms to benefit well-being and reduce emissions	83%
Make support for emissions-intensive sectors contingent on them taking action on climate change	80%
Prioritise climate-related investments to support economic recovery and jobs	79%
Replace lost or threatened jobs by creating new ones as part of a low-carbon economy	74%
Design a future UK carbon pricing mechanism	72%

Bold decisions urgently need taking in heat and transport, to set us on that path to net zero by 2050. Top of the list are funding and incentives to bring on low-carbon aviation fuels, hydrogen HGVs, heat pumps, hydrogen-ready boilers, and demonstration of CCUS in power generation and industrial clusters.



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Moral authority

All of this matters for the UK's economic recovery and for delivering on our legally binding targets, but it also matters for Glasgow and COP26. Without immediate domestic policy steps from ministers, to quote the CCC's Lord Deben, "the UK's international credibility is on the line". It was clear that COP21 President Laurent Fabius and the formidable French diplomatic machine commanded respect and were listened to. But, as he travelled the world's capitals building support for an ambitious deal, back at home France passed the Energy Transition for Clean Growth Act, putting in place binding energy targets on transport, housing and renewable energy, with the aim of halving French energy consumption by 2050. It signified France's strong political commitment to mitigating climate change.

Orchestrating the international 'Race to Zero' and the diplomacy required by it over the next year will call for every bit of credibility we can muster. Hence why leading by example at home is singled out by EI members more than any other measure as the number one priority for maintaining the UK's status as a climate leader.

The delay to COP26 bought breathing space but the test is fast approaching when the UK will need to prove its moral authority. The world has entrusted the UK with COP26. Only with ambitious clean energy action at home can we inspire reciprocal action from countries around the world.

The Energy Institute's Energy Barometer 2020 can be found at www.energyinst.org/barometer/2020

Editor's note: This ties in very closely with the [PGES Energy Policy Priorities](#)

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