NALC – Speech in House of Lords re role of local councils in Net Zero

Debate on the report by Chris Skidmore MP Mission Zero: Independent Review of Net Zero, published on 13 January.

[Baroness Scott of Needham Market](https://hansard.parliament.uk/search/MemberContributions?house=Lords&memberId=2542)

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My Lords, I too thank the noble Baroness, Lady Hayman, for securing today’s debate so soon after the publication of this excellent report. In his report, Skidmore says that

“there must be more place-based, locally led action on net zero. Our local areas and communities want to act on net zero, but too often government gets in the way. The Government must provide central leadership on net zero, but it must also empower people and places to deliver.”

I could not agree more. At this point, I should declare an interest as President of the National Association of Local Councils, the representative body for town and parish councils. They cover everything from the tiny parish in which I live, with a precept of a few thousand pounds. to some of our largest towns with budgets of many millions.

So, as the first tier of local government, they should not be overlooked in the delivery of net zero. Many are already providing place-based, locally led action. Many have put climate change on their agenda and are actively looking for ways in which they and their communities can play their part in delivering net zero. If time permitted, I would share with the House some of the many case studies of strong local leadership and practical projects, such as tree planting, recycling schemes, car charging points and much more.

With their clear place-based remit, they are uniquely positioned not just to act themselves but also to act as a catalyst for community and faith groups, local businesses and local government at other levels. Crucially, they can ensure that action is not just concentrated in large urban centres, and that even rural parishes can play their part. So, when the Government come to consider recommendation 20 on the establishment of trailblazer net-zero communities, I do hope that at least some of them will be led by ambitious town and parish councils with a proven track record. But they could do more. These councils need to be empowered by extending the general power of competence, and by the removal of administrative barriers.

Government funding streams are, frankly, a mess. Across government, there are too many funding streams that are too complex, too expensive to administer and deliver and often incoherent. That is not just my view but that of the NAO. Indeed, the Climate Change Committee has made many of the same points on this agenda. Local authorities now find that they cannot bid because they simply cannot afford to. The Government should undertake a massive simplification, particularly with regard to net-zero funding, and ensure that, this time, town and parish councils are entitled to bid and play their part, because they are often denied access.

I would add the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill to the list of Bills that have already been mentioned. There is an opportunity to do some of this quite quickly, since what I have said reflects not just what Skidmore said but what all the organisations that gave evidence to him said. Parish and town councils are leading the neighbourhood planning revolution, and they will be vital to the next stage of delivering net-zero neighbourhood plans with their communities and their buy-in. However, that Bill offers some challenges to the neighbourhood plan process, and we will explore that as it progresses. Can the Minister assure us that the levelling-up Bill will be assessed against Skidmore’s report to make sure that it is not actively working against it?

Polling shows that there is a great public appetite to do more, but people are unsure about how best to contribute. It all feels somehow remote and too big for them as individuals to make a difference, but local action can bridge that gap by involving people and communities and making a real contribution to net zero.