

PM speech on Net Zero: 20 September 2023

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1 Executive Summary

At 4:30pm on the 20 September 2023, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak delivered a speech in which he set out changes to the UK Government's green commitments.¹ This includes delaying a ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars, as well as a promise not to move ahead with proposals for things including car-pooling and taxes on meat. However, some of these seemingly abandoned ‘proposals’ have not been evidenced in any Government policy announcements. For example, there has never been a Government policy to introduce tax on meat; it remains a VAT exempt product.

During the speech, Rishi Sunak insisted that the UK will still hit net zero by 2050, despite announcing a major shift on green policies.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-net-zero-20-september-2023>

This briefing summarises some of the key takeaways from the speech, focusing on the changes that have been made to existing policies. The briefing concludes with an APSE comment which outlines the implications for local authorities.

2 A delay on a ban of new diesel and petrol vehicles

One of the headline announcements was a delay on the ban of new diesel and petrol vehicles from 2030 to 2035. The PM outlined that people would still be able to buy new diesel and petrol vehicles until 2035 and that even after that, petrol and diesels cars would still be able to be sold second hand, saying a similar approach is being taken in countries such as Germany, France and Spain. However, again the presentation of this speech was slightly disingenuous stating *"Even after that, you'll still be able to buy and sell them second-hand"*. As a point of fact, the sale of secondhand diesel and petrol vehicles remained permissible, under the old target of 20230.

The PM said the change was being made to give people more time to make the transition to electric vehicles, saying the *"upfront cost is still high"*. *It should be you the consumer that makes that choice, not government forcing you to do it."*

However, the PM said that he still expects the "vast majority" of cars sold by 2030 to be electric, *"because the costs are reducing, the range is improving, the charging infrastructure is growing"*.

The Zero Emissions Mandate is due to come into force from 1 January, which will require manufacturers to meet minimum targets for selling electric cars. Motor industry sources say that they have been informed that this will still come into effect from next year. Carmakers will be obliged to ensure that at least 22% of the cars they sell have zero tailpipe emissions. That quota will rise steadily – reaching 80% by 2030. Failure to meet those targets could result in heavy fines.

3 Phasing out gas boilers

"We will give people far more time to make the necessary transition to heat pumps. We'll never force anyone to rip out their existing boiler and replace it with a heat pump. You'll only ever have to make the switch when you're replacing your boiler anyway, and even then, not until 2035."

The PM also announced an increase to the boiler upgrade scheme, saying rather than banning boilers *"before people can afford the alternative"* the Government is going to *"support them to make the switch"* to heat pumps.

The PM said, *"The boiler upgrade scheme which gives people cash grants to upgrade their boiler will be increased by 50% to £7,500. There are no strings attached. The money will never need to be repaid."*

4 Recycling / "Scrapping plans for seven different bins"

"The proposal that we should force you to have seven different bins? I've scrapped it."

The PM announced that the Government is *"scrapping plans for households to have seven different*

bins.” But it is important to note there is no proposal that Britons be required to have seven different bins. The proposals were reported widely by the media to form part of Defra’s consistent recycling reforms, though this was never formally confirmed.

The Environment Act 2021 stipulates that local councils should arrange for collections of paper, plastic, metal and glass on top of regular collections for non-recyclables, garden waste and food waste. However, there is no suggestion a bin would be provided to every household for each recycle.

Shortly after the PM’s announcement, Defra confirmed *“it was never the case that seven bins would be needed by households”* under the yet-to-be-enacted provisions. The PM’s announcement comes just days after Defra officials claimed publication of the long-awaited consultation on consistent local authority collections was *“very imminent”*.² It is unclear whether the PM’s statement means the much-delayed plans for consistent household collections have been amended or indeed scrapped. This has, of course, created huge uncertainty for councils as they are already grappling with significant proposed changes to collections, and uncertainty on ‘producer responsibility’ regulations and the future of the Deposit Return Scheme (DRS), brought into further uncertainty by the events in Scotland which have effectively halted the proposed DRS there. Interestingly, the PM made no mention of extended producer responsibility or a deposit return scheme.

5 Landlord efficiency targets

“You could be looking at a bill of £8,000, and even if you’re only renting, you’re more than likely to see some of that passed on in higher rents.”

The PM also scrapped plans to force landlords to upgrade the energy efficiency of their properties, saying some property owners would have been forced to *“make expensive upgrades”* within two years and that would inevitably impact renters.

Again there appears to be some confusion on the tone of this announcement which may relate to the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards Regulations, which, if implemented, would mean that from 2025 new rental properties in England and Wales would need an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) with a rating of C or above. Whilst this was the subject of a Government consultation, this ended with a suggestion from Government in November 2021 that they were *“finalising the policy design”*. Whilst it was also the subject of three Private Members’ Bills, none were successful.

6 APSE Comment

In 2018, the UK Government set out a long-term plan designed to *“leave our environment in a better state than we found it”*, publishing targets across a broad range of areas and promising a new

² <https://www.mrw.co.uk/news/defra-admits-errors-in-waste-reform-management-12-09-2023/>

public body to monitor its implementation - the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP).³

Less than five years later, an OEP report in January 2023 found that *“the current pace and scale of action will not deliver the changes necessary to significantly improve the environment in England.”*⁴ Many senior figures across industry and public policy have cautioned that the PM’s announcements on 20 September will further decelerate the pace and scale of action required for the UK’s 25-year Environment plan to be realised.⁵

With inflation at its highest in a generation, and after 15 years of unprecedented wage stagnation, it is absolutely right that the Government ought to shield working people as much as possible from any costs incurred as a result of the transition to net zero.

However, a big question mark remains as to whether the PM’s announcement on 20 September truly represents *“a more pragmatic, proportionate, and realistic approach to meeting Net Zero that eases the burdens on working people.”*

In the speech the PM refers to the progress compared to other nations in terms of emissions reductions. He subsequently justifies some of the actions taken by noting that they mirror the approaches taken by just those other countries. This argument does not stand up.

He also says, *“And this is because too often, motivated by short term thinking, politicians have taken the easy way out”*. Several of the announcements made appear to be driven by short term thinking. The climate change agenda is one that will be influencing our decisions for decades to come – it is a long-term consideration. However, relevant actions need to be taken short term to avoid the worst impacts. Not only that, but they need to be seen to be being taken in the short-term. Most local authorities have set a date by which they aim to be net zero not because they have a duty to, but because they understand the consequences of not doing so. The car manufacturing industry has invested more in redesigning its factories than any investment ever before. These are the kind of changes that need to be encouraged and incentivised.

Scrapping recycling reforms puts at risk the potential for billions of pounds worth of investment by the waste sector in green infrastructure. Delays and changes to climate change plans by the Government also risks fracturing the excellent groundwork laid by local councils across the UK in the decarbonisation agenda. Whether it is local action on ensuring minimum energy consumption in housing via a fabric-first approach⁶, or councils acting as stewards of place in developing walking and cycling routes, as well as supporting EV infrastructure, there is a strong argument that current approaches, led by local councils, are already taking a dual approach; assisting in

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

⁴ <https://www.theoep.org.uk/report/progress-improving-natural-environment-england-20212022#:~:text=But%20many%20extremely%20worrying%20environmental,improve%20the%20environment%20in%20England.>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/reaction-pm-sunak-watering-down-britains-climate-goals-2023-09-20/>

⁶ <https://www.apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/news/articles/2022/homes-as-power-stations/>

decarbonisation and greening local economies whilst at the same time supporting local people with the current cost of living pressures.

In terms of operational delivery of local council services, initiatives such as the growing adaptation of alternative fuel vehicles in council fleet services⁷ demonstrates that local government is already adapting pragmatic approaches to meeting net zero.

The challenge of net zero requires government, national and local, to examine how every part of our society contributes towards carbon emissions. If we are to *"leave our environment in a better state than we found it"*, it is important the UK Government does not vacillate, dedicates itself to positive climate action and works in partnership with local councils to ensure we safeguard our planet for future generations.

APSE expects that local authorities will remain with the targets they have set and will do their utmost to meet them. Announcements from the government of the type seen yesterday do not provide support for those organisations such as local councils who are trying to promote this agenda and reduce the worst impacts of climate change.

6.1 Discover how APSE can help your council in the decarbonisation agenda

All APSE members can sign up to APSE's Climate Change and Renewables Network, which is an online network providing four learning events across the year, with expert speakers from across local government and the wider climate change sector. You can sign up to the network using [this link](#).

Many local authorities are unaware of the extent to which their existing assets have the potential to generate new revenue streams – helping to ease the pressure on budgets and assist in the fight against climate change. APSE Energy can provide a full range of expert consultancy services to member local authorities and public bodies on energy, climate change and green economy related matters. Our experts provide strategic advice, technical feasibility and business case development and project management expertise to support local authority energy projects. We also provide facilitation and stakeholder engagement. For more information on what APSE Energy offers, and the local authorities we have successfully worked with, [click here](#).

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