# ICE submission to the Environmental Audit Committee inquiry on the Seventh Carbon Budget

*November 2025*

## About the ICE

The Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) is a 97,000-strong global membership organisation with over 200 years of history.

It is a centre of engineering excellence, qualifying engineers and helping them maintain lifelong competence, assuring society that the infrastructure they create is safe, dependable and well designed.

Its network of experts offers trusted, impartial advice to politicians and decision makers on how to build and adapt infrastructure to create a more sustainable world.

This response focuses on questions 3, 4 and 5 of the Committee's inquiry.

For more information, please contact: policy@ice.org.uk.

## Submission

### 3. Costs, policy choices and economic implications

### How will the costs of delivering CB7 be distributed between households, businesses and regions, and what policies are needed to ensure fairness, resilience, and public support?

The net zero transition requires significant investment in infrastructure. Distributing the costs of these assets between households, businesses and regions will require significant social licence.

Recent polling conducted by Opinium for the ICE suggests more needs to be done to engage the public about this infrastructure investment:[1]

- Almost two-thirds of respondents (62%) felt that major infrastructure projects are poorly communicated to them (only 19% believed they are currently well communicated).

[1] The polling was conducted by Opinium Research and explored the UK public's understanding of and attitudes towards infrastructure planning, investment and delivery. Opinium conducted three virtual focus groups, each with 6-8 UK adults aged 18+, between 14 and 16 January 2025 and an online survey with a nationally representative sample of 2,007 UK adults aged 18+, between 5 and 8 February 2025.

In the public polling, who is paying (38%) and what it will cost people individually (37%) were key issues the public wanted to hear most about, after the benefits of new projects. There was also a perception that infrastructure costs too much and takes too long to deliver. Almost half of respondents believed projects are often delayed or go over budget (44%) and cost more than necessary (40%).

The public ultimately funds new infrastructure through taxes, utility bills or user charges. However, Opinium's research suggests people are divided on the fairest way to pay for new infrastructure, and many do not understand how infrastructure is paid for:

- People were relatively evenly divided on whether new projects should be funded mostly or entirely by everyone through taxes (33%) or by those who use them (39%).
- When paying for new major infrastructure projects requires either raising prices for service users or raising taxes for everyone, respondents leaned towards raising prices for service users (38%) rather than raising taxes (16%).
- However, the large proportion of people unsure about the fairest way to pay (27%) suggests many people do not understand how infrastructure is funded. This underlines the need to communicate better the costs as well as the benefits of major investment programmes, like the energy transition.

In Opinium's focus groups, resistance to taxes was linked to doubts about government efficiency and how the money would be allocated. Concerns about user charges focused on the affordability of services and the risk of pricing people out of essential infrastructure and widening social and economic disparities.

The private sector will play a major role in delivering the infrastructure required for the net zero transition. Neither the public nor the private sector was seen as transparent and accountable for efficient infrastructure delivery (25% public, 22% private, and 35% neither).

Opinium's research found that the public was concerned that private companies would prioritise profit over public good, resulting in poorer service quality, underinvestment in long-term maintenance, and pricing people out of essential services. Trust in the private sector's involvement in infrastructure investment appeared conditional on strong regulation and government oversight.

The National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA), the Climate Change Committee, ministers and their relevant departments have important roles to play in communicating the benefits of the transition and meaningfully engaging the public about the trade-offs across projects and programmes of work that will be required to support this investment.

## 4. Behavioural change

### What contribution is behavioural change expected to make alongside technological solutions in meeting statutory targets, and how should government policy support and enable this?

Public behaviour will affect every sector of importance for the net zero transition to some degree. In its advice to the UK government for the Seventh Carbon Budget, the Climate Change Committee says that household low-carbon choices will contribute to one-third of emissions reduction in 2040 – particularly through the uptake of electric cars and heat pumps.[2]

[2] Climate Change Committee (2025) The Seventh Carbon Budget

Yet, to change their behaviour, the public needs the support of policymakers, businesses and an infrastructure system that will enable them to make the required net zero-aligned choices.

The appetite for change is apparent. In public polling carried out on behalf of the ICE by Thinks Insight & Strategy in 2024, over half of respondents (57%) were enthusiastic about or seeking empowerment to change their behaviour to support the net zero transition, and believed individuals have at least some responsibility to make changes themselves.[3]

The polling segmented the public into four key groups in terms of their engagement with net zero:

- Net Zero Enthusiasts (23%): People who want to make changes and feel they can. This group feels people have individual responsibility to make changes and have peers who also want to make at least small changes.
- Seeking Empowerment (34%): People who want to make changes but doubt whether they actually can. As individuals they want to make changes but feel they need extra support to do so.
- Reluctant Followers (30%): People who mostly agree that the UK needs to cut emissions but do not think it is their responsibility to help. They will only make significant changes when forced or when they see most others doing so.
- Net Zero Resistors (13%): People who have no intention of making changes and don't feel like they need to. They fundamentally feel that the UK does not need to reach net zero.

However, shifting domestic and global political environments, and public attitudes around net zero are risks to the government's ability to maintain progress and meet the Seventh Carbon Budget. In part, this is because the rising cost of living has made people less likely to spend money on significant new investments, such as shifting to electric vehicles or improving household energy efficiency.

The onus to reach net zero is, of course, not solely on public behavioural change – international corporations and governments must play their role in the transition away from fossil fuels. However, both the government and the engineering sector could be doing more to counter changing public attitudes and capture the hearts and minds of the public on the journey to net zero. Net-zero-aligned behaviour change can unlock long-lasting social and economic as well as environmental benefits for people and the planet.

The government's upcoming public participation plan is an opportunity to address these issues and fix some of the barriers to the net zero transition.

Any public engagement strategy to drive behavioural change must acknowledge the diversity and breadth of 'the public.' For example, in the context of the energy transition, the research carried out on behalf of the ICE by Thinks found that homeownership, wealth and age are key factors in how people perceive the benefits of behavioural changes:

- Almost two-thirds (63%) of people surveyed believed improved insulation would positively affect their way of life. However, that belief was more likely among homeowners and those who are more affluent.

[3] APPGI and ICE (2024) What are the public behavioural changes required to meet net zero?

- Younger respondents, including 18-30-year-olds and 31-50-year-olds, were more likely to think net zero behavioural changes will affect them positively compared to those who are older.

The ICE has made the following recommendations on how the government should engage the public about making choices aligned with net zero:

Provide a single point of reference: There is currently no single trusted source of information that also provides transparent information about costs and 'how to' guides. In the Carbon Budget and Growth Delivery Plan set out plans to enhance its digital advice and information services by developing a single website on GOV.UK providing consumers advice on energy efficiency and clean heat.

Easy access to information, using clearer language and tailoring the right incentives for the right audiences are imperative to accelerate the net zero transition. In Scotland, householders and smaller private landlords can access free, independent, personalised and impartial advice from the Home Energy Scotland (HES) service, provided on behalf of the Scottish Government by the Energy Saving Trust. After receiving advice from an HES adviser, 47% of customers had installed at least one energy efficiency, low carbon heat or renewable energy improvement and 38% were planning to install at least one improvement in the next 12 months.[4]

Better communication can help reframe net zero choices and how they fit into people's everyday lives as additions that have positive value rather than being a burden. Climate change is complex and some of the language surrounding it can be ambiguous, off-putting, and does not generate commitment from the public. Using unambiguous language can demystify net zero choices and make them more relatable to the public, including areas such as food supply, biodiversity loss, active travel and plastic pollution.

Framing can highlight the functional, emotional and social co-benefits of the net zero transition:

- Functional benefits include improved health and well-being, cost savings and increased job opportunities.
- Emotional benefits can include an increased sense of purpose, feeling and acting more optimistically and a greater sense of control and stability.
- Social benefits include a greater sense of belonging, stronger local communities and generational bonding and cohesion.

Create a clear policy path to follow: The public needs the right infrastructure in place to enable them to change their behaviour. Public engagement must therefore be integrated within the wider programme of infrastructure upgrades to accelerate the net zero transition. The government has published a 10-Year Infrastructure Strategy to provide investors and the supply chain clarity about its long-term infrastructure plans.

The public too need certainty from government regarding policy directives and financial incentives where behavioural change is required. Inconsistent policymaking and mixed messaging has had a negative impact on the public's ability to engage with net zero.

A supportive policy environment will be critical in incentivising widespread public participation in solutions, adoption of technologies, and shifts in behaviours focused on achieving net zero. Rather than enforced push factors, a gentler incentive-based approach will lead to longer-term behavioural shifts.

[4] APPGI and ICE (2024) What are the public behavioural changes required to meet net zero?

Address market and non-financial barriers: Structural issues with the market include the need for energy companies to provide a market response to encourage public take-up. The lack of financial means is a significant barrier preventing the public from making net-zero-aligned choices. The public has different types of housing tenure and often wildly different financial situations, therefore, different parts of society will experience the costs and benefits of net zero interventions in very different ways.

Share information: Encourage leadership and knowledge transfer from larger-scale businesses and private sector organisations to guide SMEs, third-sector organisations and the public on reducing emissions. Businesses can play a leading role in influencing attitudes and behaviours around adopting net zero behaviours, sharing best practices, and signposting existing awareness campaigns around net zero, which can also strengthen the consistency of a campaign with the public.

## 5. Public engagement

### How can the Government engage the public in ways that build understanding, tackle misconceptions, and increase buy-in for the statutory action required under CB7 and Carbon Budget Delivery Plans?

Public engagement is needed to build understanding and support for the infrastructure projects needed to deliver net zero. An awareness of the benefits an asset can deliver can shift public perception away from cost and time metrics towards positive outcomes that are achieved via infrastructure investment such as economic growth, cleaner air, greater energy security and lower bills.

However, public engagement must be done well and the commitment to delivering those benefits must be realised. As noted above, recent polling commissioned by the ICE suggests more needs to be done to engage the public about infrastructure investment, including communicating the benefits. The polling suggested that people recognise that infrastructure investment can deliver benefits to society and they want to hear more about them:

- People were keenest to hear about why projects are being built and what the benefits will be (47%).
- Who is paying for the projects (38%) and what it will cost people individually (37%) were also priorities, the latter being a higher concern than the overall cost.

Recognition of the benefits of infrastructure investment was stronger at a local and individual level. The connection between infrastructure investment and national goals like net zero was considered less important:

- Respondents believed the most important benefits that could come from new infrastructure projects in the UK were boosting economic growth (43%) followed by more reliable public services (35%) and improved transport and connectivity (32%).
- In contrast, national goals like reducing regional inequalities (14%), climate resilience (12%) and decarbonisation (11%) scored much lower.

The National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury (CST), with permanent responsibility for the infrastructure system via the 10-Year Infrastructure Strategy, will have important roles in leading a national conversation about the value of infrastructure and the trade-offs required to deliver for the public.

In practice, this should include meaningful two-way engagement about the wider benefits of infrastructure delivery, and the necessary prioritisation of projects and community needs to shape a future for the country driven by quality infrastructure delivery.

Public engagement isn't just about consulting on decisions that have already been taken. Instead, it must be focused on a genuine societal conversation about what kind of infrastructure communities require. After all, assets are the means towards a vision of what a community wants and needs – not ends in themselves. In a wider sense, and in political and media environments often focused on major project time and cost figures, a shift towards making a case for the benefits a project delivers would be welcome.

Sustained public support is important because delivering infrastructure – and achieving net zero – are long-term endeavours. Delivering major projects often spans multiple parliamentary terms. A long-term pipeline and strategy therefore require support from across the political divide. The public are the voters and ultimate funders of infrastructure who can influence the political context to encourage enduring cross- and intra-party support.