Governance for Net Zero Project Evaluation – Experiences from UK Local Authorities

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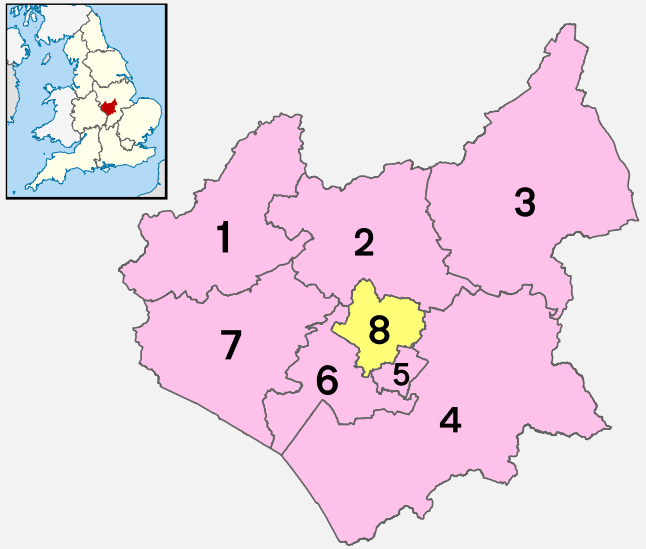
Context of Net Zero in the UK

- Legally-binding target to achieve Net Zero nationally by 2050
  - Local authorities seen as key in this energy transition
  - Local Area Energy Planning (LAEP) methodology used by many local authorities
  - Place-based climate action gaining in prominence, but no clear national guidance
  - ‘Great British Energy’, Regional Energy Strategic Plans to provide structure and finance for local energy initiatives

Case Study – Leicester and Leicestershire

- Innovate UK–funded (Leicestershire Collaborate to Accelerate Net Zero)
  - May 2024 to November 2025
  - 7 District Councils overarching County Council; 1 Unitary Authority
  - Part of £60m ‘Net Zero Living’ national cohort programme[1]
- Project focus areas
  - Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) for each district and city – to be online GIS-based resource
  - Community-led energy projects
  - Collaborative governance to aid LAEP project delivery
  - Business, community and citizen engagement via ‘Greener Future Leicestershire’ platform



1: Innovate UK (2025) Enable, Embed, Enact: Maximising the Value of Net Zero Planning. Available from: https://iuk-business-connect.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Enable-Embed-Enact-Maximising-the-Value-of-Net-Zero-Planning.pdf

Local Authority Roles in Net Zero Governance

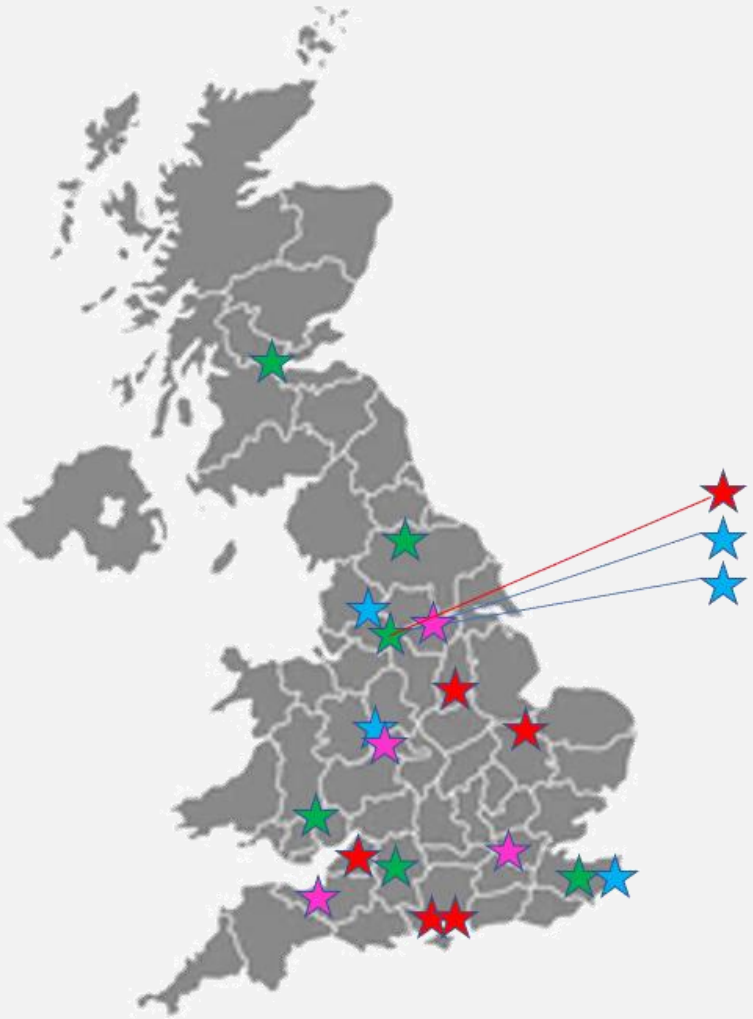
Strategic Direction	Regulation and Enforcement	Facilitating Collaboration	Responsibility
• Influencing, coordinating, policy-making, implementing? • Den Uyl & Russell (2017) – "owning" the problem of net zero • Setting policy, but devolved powers needed	• Standards of actions, expected actions of market actors • Busch et al (2021) recommends co-creation, Sugar & Webb (2022) suggest devolution a barrier	• Facilitating and convening collaborative structures with stakeholders • "Limited ability to integrate policies locally" – Bedford, Catney & Robinson (2023)	• Carr-Whitworth et al (2023): responsibility a key condition for success • Tingey & Webb (2020): clearer devolution of responsibilities from national to local

Exploring Effective & Innovative UK practice

- Interview-based study conducted in late 2024
- Research aim: Identifying the governance-related factors behind effective and innovative actions to deliver action on net zero and/or a local area energy plan (LAEP) for a UK locality.
- Objectives:
  1. Identify **enablers and barriers** to effective LAEP and net zero governance
  2. Identify and document specific, **innovative and/or effective governance approaches**, including how these are transacted and their impacts
  3. Identify ***innovative and/or effective*** **delivery approaches**, including how they are done and their impacts
  4. Explore how these approaches influence ***investment***, ***stakeholder engagement*** **and relevant** ***high-level buy in from stakeholders***
  5. Explore how these approaches reflect ***good governance principles***

Respondents

- **19 interviews total**
  - 6 Unitary, 6 County (2 CA), 5 consultants, 1 funder, 1 business
  - Seeking those recognised nationally for innovation or delivery
    - Selective and snowball sampling



Exploring Effective & Innovative UK practice

- 17 semi-structured interviews with local authority officers, one interview with a national-level consultancy, one transcript of investors roundtable
- Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008) selected for qualitative analysis
- 9 top-level themes inductive, 2 added during analysis
- Paragraph-level coding, sentence-level if paragraphs contained multiple themes
- Specific corpus searches for “evaluation” and stems, and “reflection” and stems to interrogate evaluation practice

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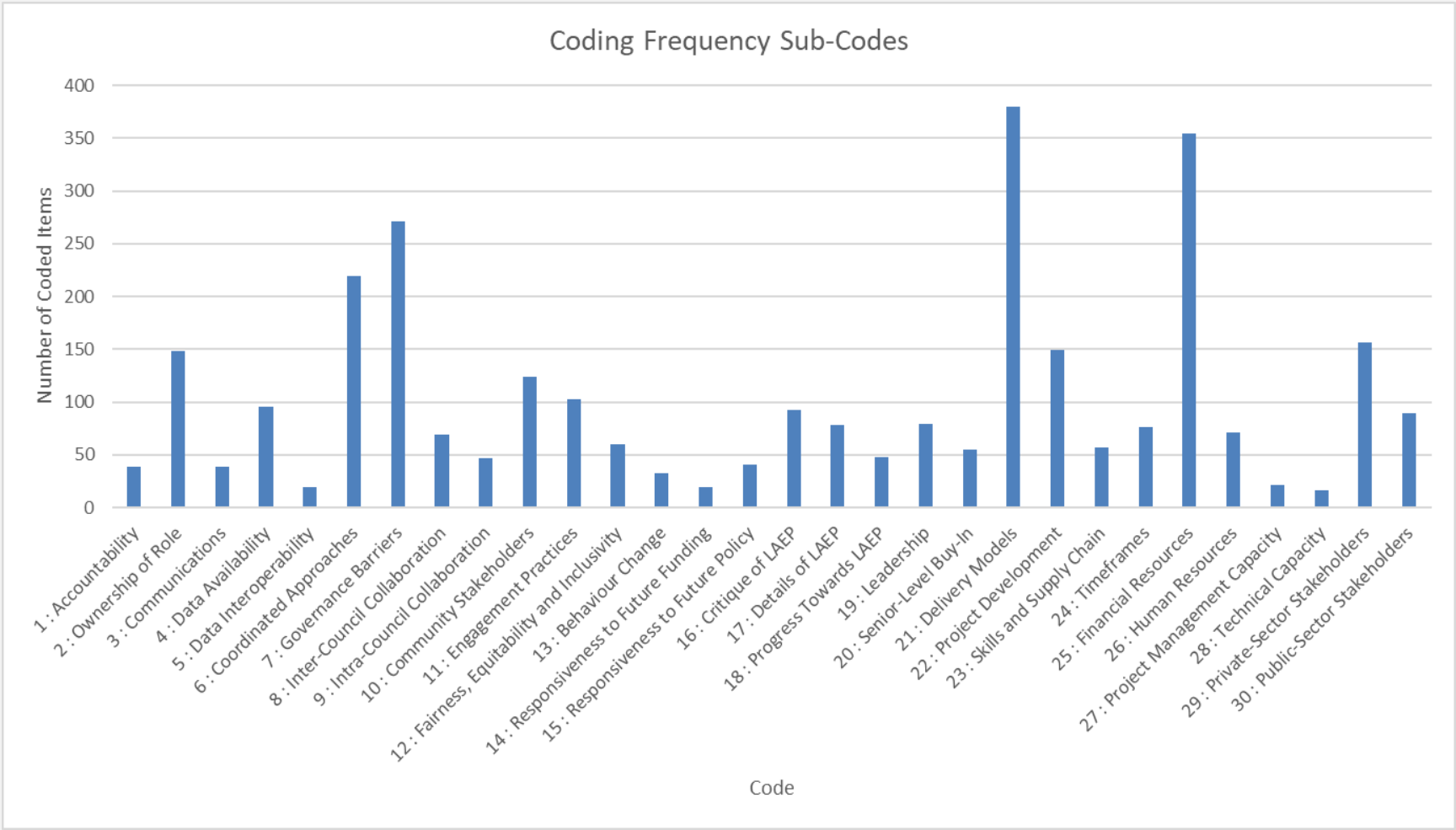
- Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008) selected for qualitative analysis
- 9 top-level themes inductive, 2 added during analysis
- Paragraph-level coding, sentence-level if paragraphs contained multiple themes, 31 sub-codes
- Specific corpus searches for “evaluation” and stems, and “reflection” and stems to interrogate evaluation practice

Results


Delivery Models
Financial Resources
Governance Barriers
Coordinated Approaches
Private-Sector Stakeholders
Project Development
Ownership of Role
Community Stakeholders
Engagement Practices
Data Availability
Critique of LAEP
Details of LAEP
Timeframes
Human Resources
Public-Sector Stakeholders
Inter-Council Collaboration
Senior-Level Buy-In
Progress Towards LAEP
Leadership
Fairness, Equitability and Inclusivity
Skills and Supply Chain
Intra-Council Collaboration
Responsiveness to Future Policy
Accountability
Behaviour Change
Project Management Capacity
Communications
Data Interoperability
Responsiveness to Future Funding
Technical Capacity

Results


Coding Frequency Sub-Codes
Number of Coded Items
400
350
300
250
200
150
100
50
0
1 : Accountability
2 : Ownership of Role
3 : Communications
4 : Data Availability
5 : Data Interoperability
6 : Coordinated Approaches
7 : Governance Barriers
8 : Inter-Council Collaboration
9 : Intra-Council Collaboration
10 : Community Stakeholders
11 : Engagement Practices
12 : Fairness, Equitability and Inclusivity
13 : Behaviour Change
14 : Responsiveness to Future Funding
15 : Responsiveness to Future Policy
16 : Critique of LAEP
17 : Details of LAEP
18 : Progress Towards LAEP
19 : Leadership
20 : Senior-Level Buy-In
21 : Delivery Models
22 : Project Development
23 : Skills and Supply Chain
24 : Timeframes
25 : Financial Resources
26 : Human Resources
27 : Project Management Capacity
28 : Technical Capacity
29 : Private-Sector Stakeholders
30 : Public-Sector Stakeholders
Code

Focus on Data & Evaluation

- Focus on evaluation practice: two specific sub-codes most relevant, “data availability” and “data interoperability”, 96 and 19 references respectively
- Coordination of data across LAs a blocker to action – Net Zero Go, OnePlant, LNZA
- LAEP data post-delivery a specific barrier – data maintenance, data ownership, but vital for engagement

“Everyone wants to have a report, but that's not the key outcome because the report is out of date as soon as it's published.” – Officer, Tier 1 Local Authority

Focus on Evaluation Practice

- Evidence suggest piecemeal evaluation practices, lack of clear evaluation objectives, lack of trackable indicators
- Power of reflective space for skills development and project development
- KPI comprehension by senior decision-makers limited
- Lack of a standardised national framework for success or failure

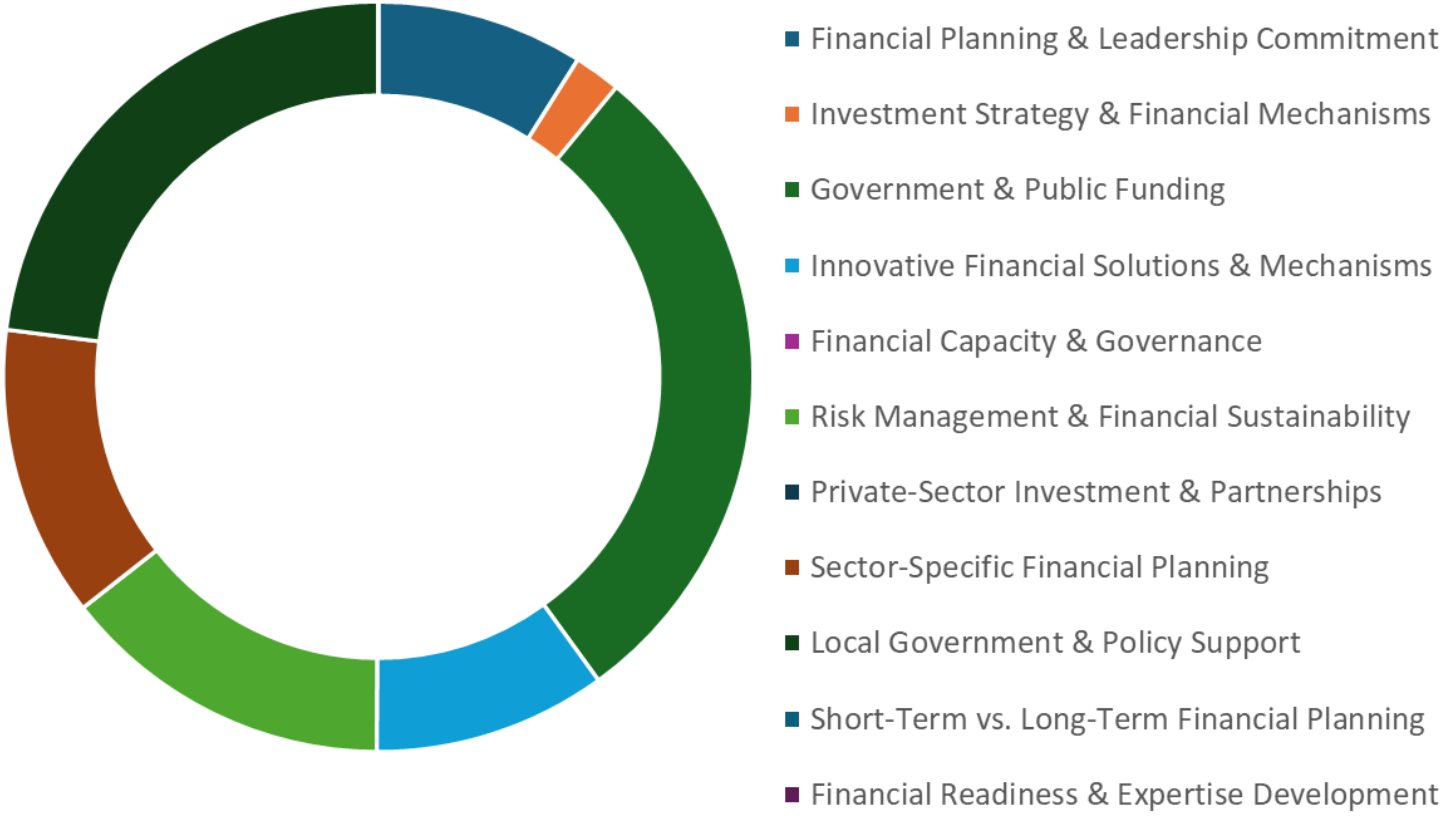
"Ongoing monitoring of targets or even having clear targets around some of our delivery is still currently missing" – Officer, Unitary Authority

Conclusions

- Enhanced governance needed – LAs have critical roles to play with deep place-based knowledge
- Local authorities compromised in intersecting ways, financial pressures, staff capacity, lack of statutory obligations, lack of mandated evaluation, leading to…
- Strong evidence of lack of evaluation practice
- Data accessibility and interoperability needed, with staff time and resource allocated to evaluation, to develop experience

Sneak Peak: Current Work

- **Recently-released DESNZ "Fit-For-Finance" Tool – applied to the Leicestershire content**
  - 150-question assessment framework, 7 overall themes with 53 sub-themes



- DESNZ suggests even distribution between factors ideal
- What's the problem with this chart?

Thanks for listening!

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