

# How can we mobilise society to reach net zero?

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The transformation required to reach net zero is fundamentally a social one. [Analysis by the UK Climate Change Committee](#) shows that technological change alone is insufficient to reach this goal; indeed, they calculate that the majority (62%) of the changes required will be, at least in part, behavioural or social. Substantial [shifts will be required](#) in how (and how much) we travel, in what we eat and buy, and in how we use energy.

The scale of this challenge should not be underestimated. To date, public engagement with climate change has been superficial, with a reluctance from both policy-makers and private citizens to address lifestyle change in any serious way.

So, what do we already know about how to achieve this profound behavioural and social transformation? First, we know that this can be done and has occurred in the past. As the [Rapid Transition Alliance points out](#), during World War II private vehicle use in the UK declined by 95% and domestic coal consumption dropped by a quarter; reliance on imported food was also cut in half.



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But while a wartime analogy is instructive in some senses, [the climate crisis is fundamentally different](#) in other respects. There is no clear 'enemy' to mobilise against; and in any case, the social upheaval of the second world war was a brutal experience for many people.

In order to mobilise society to reach net zero, we must ensure this is [connected to people's everyday concerns and values](#). Social and behavioural change is more likely if solutions are grounded in parallel [benefits for people and communities](#), such as improved health from active travel and from eating plant-based diets, as well as lower energy bills. Contrary to many of the assumptions of consumer society, a wealth of research now shows that there is a [reciprocal relationship](#) between living sustainably (including consuming less 'stuff' overall) and personal wellbeing.

In order to ensure that the future transformation is seen as fair and acceptable to the public, there is a need to scale up public engagement and bring about a [national conversation on climate change](#). This can also help to ensure this topic moves from being something that seems invisible and is rarely discussed, to being a priority with which people can readily relate.

In terms of deliberate policy to shift lifestyles and behaviour, previous research has shown that [multiple interventions](#) are necessary to address the [range of factors](#) that shape our lifestyles. For example, dramatically cutting levels of smoking required information and education campaigns, the use of uncompromising labelling and imagery on packaging, smoke-free policies, support services, price/tax increases, and bans on tobacco advertising and sponsorship. The lesson here is that no one intervention on its own was sufficient; achieving a social and cultural shift required many different kind of approaches working simultaneously.

We are exploring how to achieve more profound changes to lifestyles and broader social systems through the new [UK Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations \(CAST\)](#). CAST is a collaboration between Cardiff, Manchester, York, and East Anglia Universities, and the charity Climate Outreach. Our work will identify and experiment with social and behavioural routes to achieving radical and lasting cuts in emissions from mobility, diet, consumption, and heating and cooling. Across our programme of research, we will explore the types of changes in society that [people consider to be both feasible and preferred](#); [learn lessons](#) from the ways in which major and rapid change has occurred in the past; [participate in projects](#) designed to implement social change at different scales (from the individual to national level); and develop [new communication and engagement approaches](#).

As we move into the 2020's, we are entering a critical period for action on the climate crisis. We will only be successful in this if we are able to harness the interest, aspirations and involvement of the wider public to bring about the scale of change needed to how we live.



Katie Smith