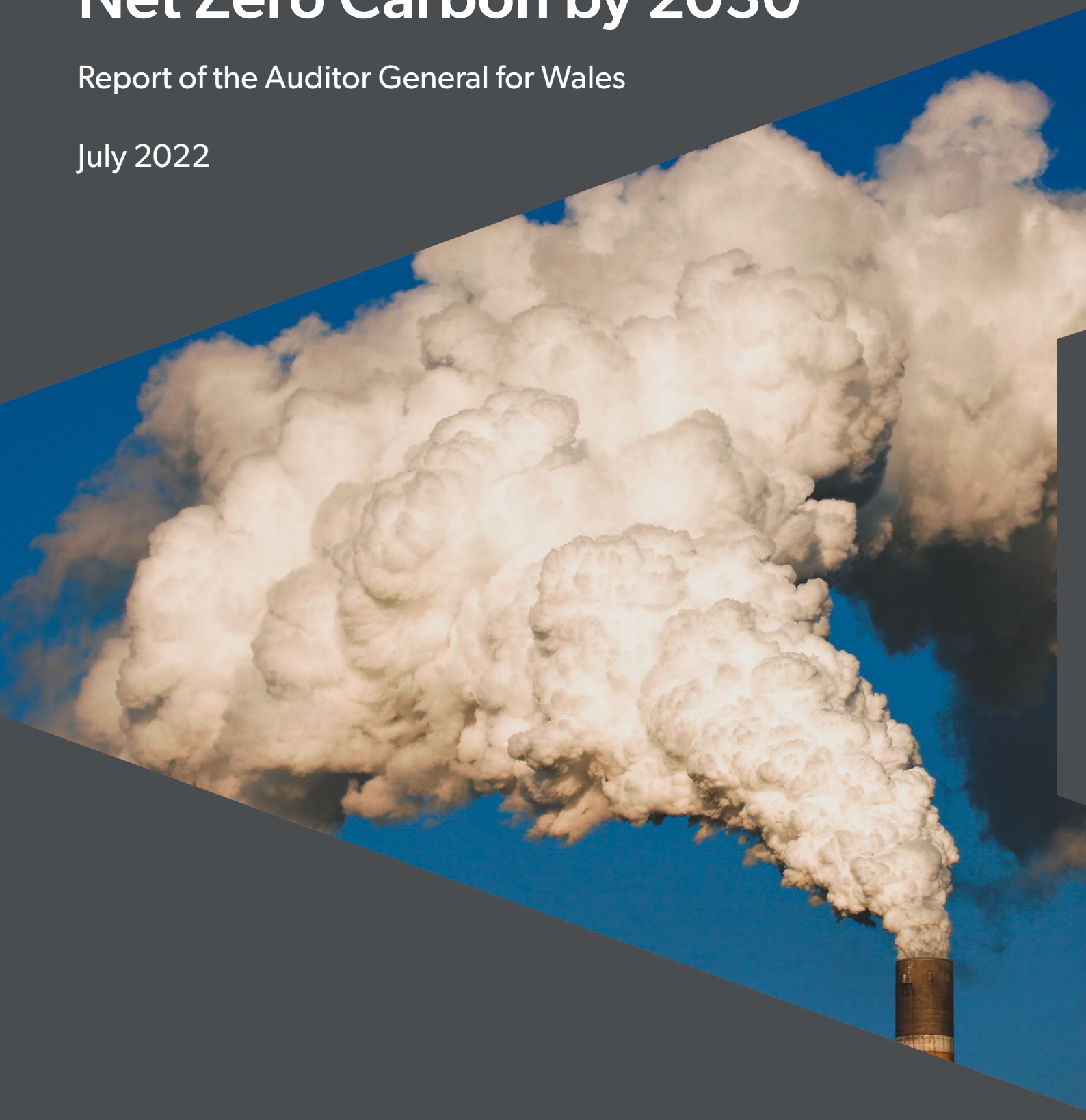


# Public Sector Readiness for Net Zero Carbon by 2030

Report of the Auditor General for Wales

July 2022



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Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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# Detailed report

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## Background

- 1 Climate change is one of the world's defining challenges and it requires immediate action from everyone. A landmark [report](#) by the United Nations in August 2021 said that human activity is changing our climate in unprecedented ways and that drastic reductions in carbon emissions are necessary.
- 2 The latest climate projections for Wales show an increased chance of milder, wetter winters and hotter, drier summers, rising sea levels and an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. The implications are clearly stark.
- 3 A crucial way to mitigate the impacts of climate change is to reduce carbon emissions. In March 2021, following advice from the Climate Change Committee<sup>1</sup> in December 2020, the Welsh Government set new [targets](#) for a 63% carbon reduction by 2030, an 89% reduction by 2040, and a 100% reduction by 2050<sup>2</sup>. In addition, the Welsh Government set out a more challenging collective ambition for the Welsh public sector<sup>3</sup> to achieve net zero carbon by 2030 (the 2030 collective ambition).
- 4 In June 2021, the Welsh Government published its [Programme for Government 2021-2026](#) which puts tackling the climate and nature emergencies at the heart of the new government. The Programme for Government also makes a series of commitments to embed a response to climate change in everything the Welsh Government does.

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1 The Climate Change Committee (CCC) is an independent, statutory body established under the Climate Change Act 2008. Its role is to advise the UK governments on emissions targets and to report on progress made in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preparing for and adapting to the impacts of climate change.

2 Net zero does not mean eliminating greenhouse gas emissions but balancing the greenhouse gas emissions with the amount of gases being removed from the atmosphere.

3 The Welsh Government's definition of the 'public sector' in this case covers 65 bodies as set out in Appendix 2 of the [Welsh Government, Public sector net zero data: baseline and recommendations, June 2022](#).

- 5 The Welsh Government has also published Net zero carbon status by 2030: A route map for decarbonisation across the Welsh public sector (the public sector route map) to support the Welsh public sector in achieving the 2030 collective ambition. Alongside the public sector route map, the Welsh Government published the net zero reporting guide and associated spreadsheet to allow the public sector to capture and report emissions on a consistent basis.
- 6 The Auditor General has committed to carrying out a long-term programme of work on climate change. Our first piece of work is a baseline review that asks: '**How is the public sector preparing to achieve the Welsh Government's collective ambition for a net zero public sector by 2030?**'. To inform the baseline review, 48 public bodies, including the Welsh Government, completed a call for evidence. **Appendix 1** explains our audit approach and methods.
- 7 We are publishing two reports to share our findings:
  - **this key findings report:** this report targets senior leaders and those with scrutiny roles in public bodies, with the aim of inspiring them to increase the pace of their work on achieving the 2030 collective ambition. We have included questions at the end of each section of this report for organisations to reflect on. While these questions are not exhaustive, they provide important pointers for organisations to consider.
  - **evidence report – to follow:** a report that will provide more detailed findings and data from the call for evidence and our wider work.

## Overall conclusion

- 8 There is clear uncertainty about whether the public sector will meet its 2030 collective ambition. Our work identifies significant, common barriers to progress that public bodies must collectively address to meet the ambition of a net zero public sector by 2030. And while public bodies are demonstrating commitment to carbon reduction, they must now significantly ramp up their activities, increase collaboration and place decarbonisation at the heart of their day-to-day operations and decisions. Organisations need to be bold and innovative and share experiences of their successes and failures. The Auditor General will not criticise organisations for taking well-managed risks to address this unprecedented challenge.
- 9 We have set out five calls for action for organisations to tackle the common barriers to decarbonisation in the public sector. These are:



- 1 Strengthen your leadership and demonstrate your collective responsibility through effective collaboration



- 2 Clarify your strategic direction and increase your pace of implementation



- 3 Get to grips with the finances you need



- 4 Know your skills gaps and increase your capacity



- 5 Improve data quality and monitoring to support your decision making

- 10 We are not making specific recommendations given the high-level nature of our review. However, we encourage public bodies to consider the messages in this report, and through their internal governance structures, set out publicly how they intend to respond to the calls for action.

## Calls for action



### **Strengthen your leadership and demonstrate your collective responsibility through effective collaboration**

- 11 The Welsh Government showed leadership when it declared a climate emergency in 2019. Many of the other public bodies have followed suit, for example, 18 out of 22 Welsh councils have now declared a climate emergency.
- 12 The Welsh Government also demonstrated leadership when it set the 2030 collective ambition and in May 2021 when it established a new Ministerial portfolio for climate change. A related change to the Welsh Government's organisational structure came into effect from 1 April 2022.
- 13 We have found considerable activity by public bodies, supporting the move towards decarbonisation. So, public bodies are clearly taking this agenda seriously.
- 14 Despite this, they must do more because there is considerable uncertainty (and clear doubt from some organisations) about whether the 2030 collective ambition will be met. In the NHS, we found uncertainty that even a 34% reduction in emissions would be achieved across that sector<sup>4</sup>. Bodies told us about significant barriers to progress in decarbonising, such as difficulties in translating strategy into action, uncertainty about finances, a lack of skills and capacity, and issues with decarbonisation data. These matters are discussed throughout this report.
- 15 Now is the time for bold leadership. Public bodies must reduce carbon emissions from their estates, from their services, and from the goods and services they procure. On top of that, they must adopt a wider leadership role in championing the decarbonisation agenda in all sectors within the communities they serve to work towards a 'just transition'<sup>5</sup>.
- 16 Public bodies will need to demonstrate stronger collective leadership because collaboration between organisations will be critical to achieving the 2030 collective ambition. Some respondents told us that a wholesale change of thinking is required, with a more co-ordinated and joined-up approach across the public sector.

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4 The NHS Wales Decarbonisation Strategic Delivery Plan sets out 46 initiatives that are estimated to reduce carbon emissions by 34% by 2030.

5 A 'just transition' means taking action on climate change and greening the economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned. Policy 1 in [Net Zero Wales Carbon Budget 2 \(2021-2025\)](#) sets out the Welsh Government's views on a just transition.

- 17 Several cross-organisational panels and programme boards already exist to collaborate on climate issues including decarbonisation. And while public bodies expressed largely positive views about the way they are collaborating, there was also recognition that these efforts need to be ramped up. There is a collective responsibility on the public sector to make existing structures work. Public bodies also need to consider what additional collaboration is needed within sectors and across the public sector.
- 18 Senior leaders must do more to demonstrate they fully grasp the urgency and scale of the challenge and clearly identify this as a top priority for their organisation if they are to achieve their ambitions. Decarbonisation (and wider climate risks) must be at the core of day-to-day business decisions and operations. This agenda must be integrated into all services and operations, so that decarbonisation is delivered alongside other outcomes.
- 19 The frameworks provided by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (including public services boards and the setting of well-being objectives) can be used to help organisations decarbonise. Application of the sustainable development principle in key areas such as procurement, workforce planning and finance will also help delivery of the decarbonisation agenda.
- 20 Those charged with governance and scrutiny roles in individual organisations need to support the direction of travel while at the same time challenging whether enough is being done.

### Questions that senior leaders and those who scrutinise them may want to ask

- Are we treating the climate crisis and the need to decarbonise as a real ‘emergency’?
- Can we demonstrate that decarbonisation is at the core of day-to-day business decisions and operations?
- Is the urgency and scale of the challenge well communicated by senior leaders and understood throughout our organisation?
- Do we have specific and effective scrutiny and governance arrangements for managing the journey to net zero?
- Do we understand the main barriers to progress and how well are we collaborating to overcome them?



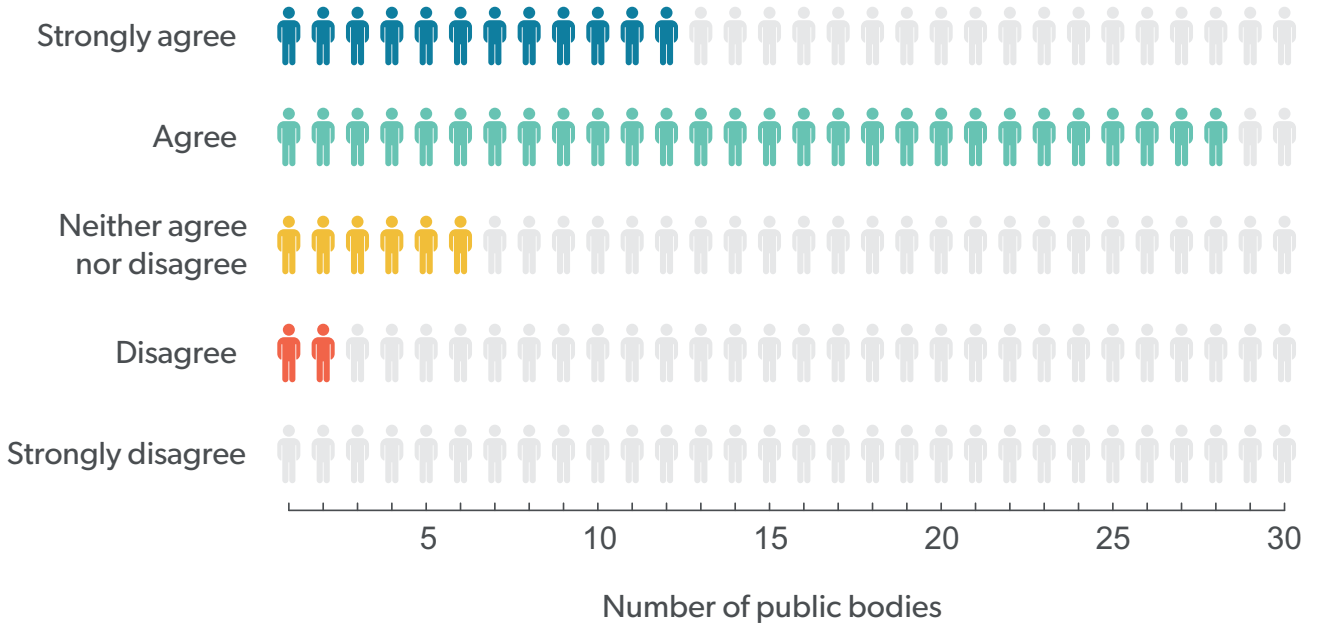




## Clarify your strategic direction and increase your pace of implementation

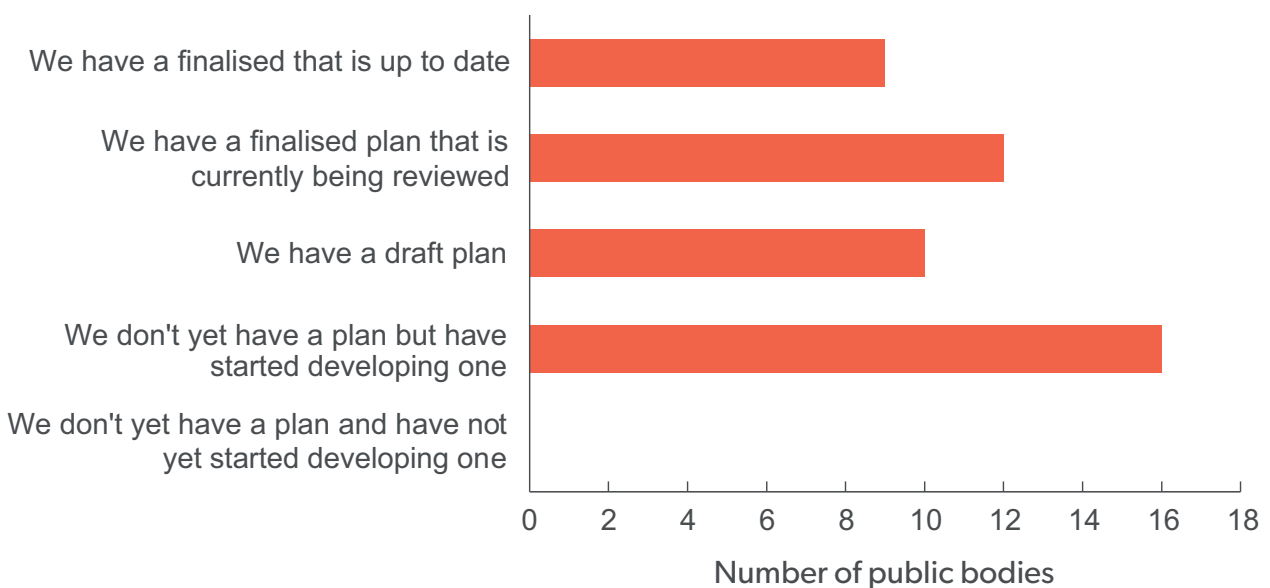
- 21 To deliver the 2030 collective ambition, it is essential that Wales has clear, joined-up, integrated strategies across the public sector. The action plans resulting from those strategies will also have to be implemented at pace.
- 22 In response to our call for evidence, public bodies were generally positive about the strategic direction set out by the Welsh Government and that it had been communicated well through the [public sector route map \(Appendix 3\)](#). In response to our question about the extent to which they were using the public sector route map, most public bodies said they were using it, to varying degrees, and only five said they were not.
- 23 Despite generally positive views about the national strategic direction, public bodies want more help to translate the strategy into action. Several organisations told us that while the public sector route map provides a high-level template, they need more clarity, support and guidance on how to decarbonise.
- 24 The Welsh Government told us that it deliberately designed the public sector route map to be a high-level framework to assist public bodies in developing local solutions based on individual circumstances, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. The Welsh Government is providing other forms of central assistance on decarbonisation, including support through the [Welsh Government Energy Service](#), grant funding for various programmes and funding of the Welsh Local Government Association [transition and recovery support programme](#).
- 25 Some sector-specific guidance is available to support public bodies to translate the vision into action. For the NHS, the Carbon Trust and the NHS Wales Shared Services Partnership have set out more detailed actions in the [NHS Decarbonisation Strategic Delivery Plan](#). In local government, the Welsh Local Government Association is developing more tailored support and guidance for councils.
- 26 Overall, our work has shown that public bodies are at very different stages in setting out their action plans for decarbonisation. While **Exhibit 1** shows most public bodies feel they have set a clear strategic direction, **Exhibit 2** shows that just over a third of organisations did not have a decarbonisation plan at the time of our call for evidence. All organisations had at least started to develop their plan, and under Welsh Government policy they have until April 2023 to develop one.

**Exhibit 1: public bodies' responses to the statement, 'Our organisation has set a clear strategic direction to support the achievement of the 2030 carbon reduction targets'**



Source: Audit Wales call for evidence

**Exhibit 2: status of public bodies' action plans**



Note: One public body did not respond to this question.

Source: Audit Wales call for evidence

- 27 The public sector route map sets out milestones for 2021-22, during which the Welsh Government expects the public sector to be 'moving up a gear'. The Welsh Government considers there has been good progress and the public sector is picking up the pace. However, the Welsh Government recognises there is still significant work to be done and to date, the public sector has not fully achieved the 'moving up a gear' milestones.

### Questions that senior leaders and those who scrutinise them may want to ask

- Have we set out a clear strategic approach and action plan for decarbonisation? If not, why not?
- Have we given due consideration to recommendations from the Future Generations Commissioner on decarbonisation, including those within the Future Generations Report 2020<sup>6</sup>?
- Are we involving our staff, stakeholders and citizens in the development and delivery of our strategic approach?
- Have we collaborated with others to develop our overall approach?
- How will our approach to decarbonisation help us deliver against other strategic objectives (including well-being objectives) as well as meeting the 2030 collective ambition?
- Do our other corporate strategies, policies and operations reflect the strategic approach we have set out for decarbonisation?
- Does our action plan set out clear milestones that align with the 2030 collective ambition and is it being implemented at sufficient pace?



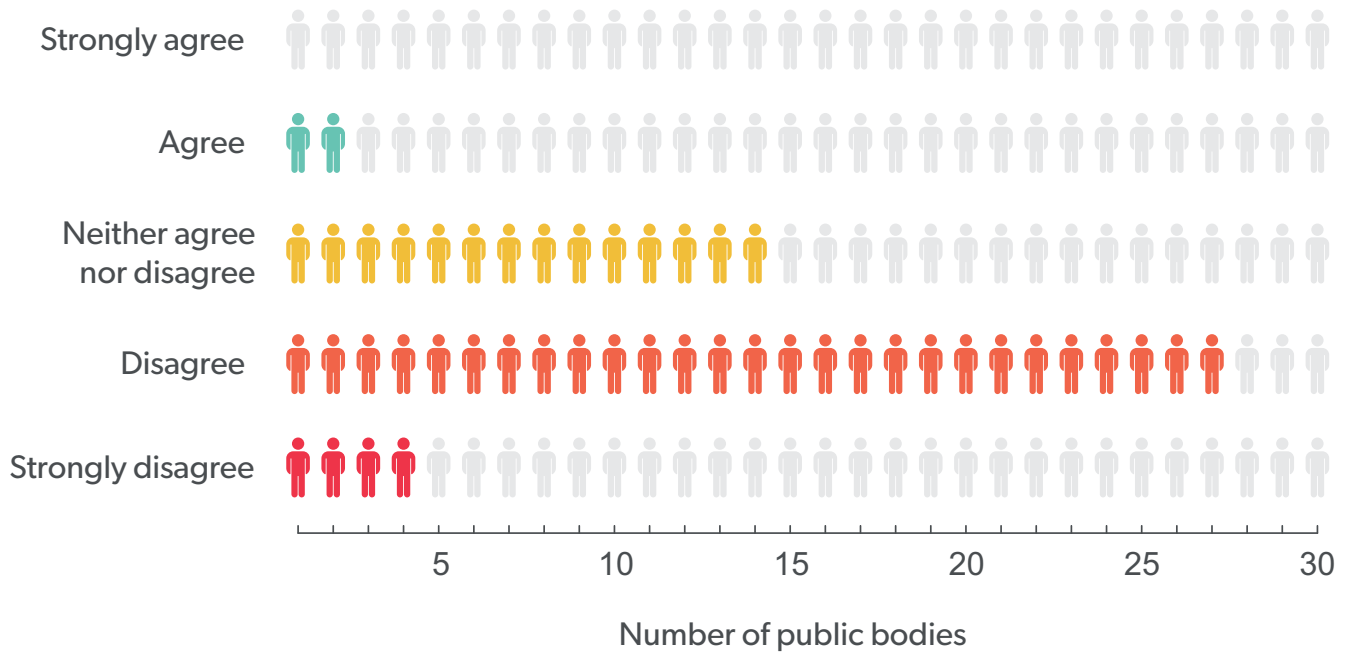
6 [The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, Future Generations Report 2020, May 2020.](#)



## Get to grips with the finances you need

- 28 Public bodies need to plan their finances in such a way that they can deliver their decarbonisation strategies and action plans. This will require long-term planning because decarbonisation will need investment for many years. It will also require immediate expenditure because if the 2030 collective ambition is to be met, urgent action is essential.
- 29 Public bodies recognised that significant investment in decarbonisation will be required, particularly for upfront infrastructure costs. But they were uncertain about where the funding for this investment would come from. The Welsh Government is providing funding to public bodies in various ways, but it has said it cannot fund everything. Public bodies will therefore need to think carefully about how they can use their existing funding in different ways, explore potential additional funding opportunities and consider how they might share costs with partner organisations.
- 30 Overall, public bodies told us that finances are a significant barrier to achieving the 2030 collective ambition. This is because of uncertainty in relation to the long-term additional funding they will have available to them, and about difficulties in getting to grips with the costs of decarbonising. **Exhibit 3** shows that most public bodies have not fully assessed the financial implications of the 2030 collective ambition. In some cases, this is because they have not yet set out a clear set of actions and activities to achieve net zero.

**Exhibit 3: public bodies' responses to the statement, 'Our organisation has fully assessed the financial implications of meeting the 2030 carbon reduction targets'**



Note: One public body did not respond to this question.

Source: Audit Wales call for evidence

### Questions that senior leaders and those who scrutinise them may want to ask

- Do we know what we are currently spending on activities to help meet the 2030 collective ambition?
- Do we know how much we would need to spend to help achieve the 2030 collective ambition?
- How are we deciding how much to spend on decarbonisation?
- If we have not yet assessed the financial implications of the 2030 collective ambition, do we understand why we have been unable to?
- What are we doing to collaborate with others, to understand the financial implications, and to share costs?
- Do our budgets and expenditure reflect the need to reduce carbon emissions urgently?
- Are we setting out a good level of detail in our financial statements in relation to decarbonisation spending?  
(See [our blog](#) on this matter).





## Know your skills gaps and increase your capacity

- 31 Within public bodies it is everyone's responsibility to take action towards the 2030 collective ambition. Delivering that ambition will require public bodies to have staff in place with some specialist expertise. Our work found enthusiasm to deliver, but we also found widespread capacity issues and skills gaps. Skills gaps in relation to decarbonisation are not unique and are symptomatic of a wider challenge across the public sector. For example, in our [Picture of Public Services 2021](#) report, we highlight that staffing numbers have fallen and skills deficits have emerged.
- 32 Public bodies told us their resources are stretched in delivering their core services, and they are lacking specialist skills in carbon reduction and in monitoring carbon emissions. In addition, the complex nature of the field means that bodies are competing for limited expertise and knowledge.
- 33 Public bodies need to understand the staff capacity and skills they have in place through robust workforce planning. Training will play a crucial role in ensuring staff understand their decarbonisation responsibilities and are best equipped to deal with the task at hand. There is also an opportunity to share the knowledge, expertise and capacity that exists within the public sector as well as the private and third sectors.

### Questions that senior leaders and those who scrutinise them may want to ask

- Do we know what skills are needed, both now and in the future, to ensure we can deliver against the 2030 collective ambition?
- Do we have a plan in place to deal with any identified skills and capacity gaps through training, recruitment or working with peers and stakeholders to share resources and expertise?





## Improve data quality and monitoring to support your decision making

- 34 Public bodies need to understand where their emissions are coming from so they can check if they are making progress. We found that data issues are a major barrier to having a shared understanding of the problem and to taking strategic decisions about the solutions.
- 35 Carbon emissions monitoring and reporting is a complex and rapidly developing area worldwide. The Welsh Government has published a common reporting methodology for public bodies to report their emissions through the [Welsh Public Sector Net Zero Reporting Guide](#) and the net zero reporting spreadsheet. In doing so, the Welsh Government is trying new ways of improving emissions data. Welsh public bodies responded by putting new arrangements in place and by submitting their first set of annual data in October 2021.
- 36 The Welsh Government commissioned independent consultants, to review the first submission of emissions data from public bodies and in June 2022, the Welsh Government published the consultancy report in full. The report<sup>7</sup> provides the first estimate of the full range of emissions by the public sector in delivering services for the people of Wales. The report states that the figures include significant uncertainty, particularly in relation to supply chain emissions, and that the data has not been thoroughly audited. The figures suggest emissions across Wales for the public sector reduced by 5% between 2019-20 and 2020-21.
- 37 In response to our call for evidence, public bodies recognised the usefulness of having a common reporting methodology. However, some responses pointed to concerns over some calculation methods, particularly regarding supply chain and land use, and called for further clarity of definitions to ensure consistent interpretation and reporting. Some responses also noted that existing systems were not able to capture the required data, and had to be updated, or new systems had to be put into place. This was often time consuming and resource intensive. NHS bodies also raised concerns about duplication with existing reporting arrangements on carbon emissions.

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7 [See Footnote 3.](#)



38 It is important to get the data right because this information will underpin decision making and monitoring of progress for decades to come. However, we acknowledge this is the first year of the new arrangements to report a complex issue and the Welsh Government is committed to developing the guidance further to address the issues identified in the consultancy report (**paragraph 36**) and to reflect wider feedback. The Welsh Government published revised [reporting guidance](#) in July 2022. We also acknowledge that while there are concerns about supply chain data, the requirement to report this data reinforces the findings from previous studies that show the importance of reducing emissions from procurement and the supply chain<sup>8</sup>.

### Questions that senior leaders and those who scrutinise them may want to ask

- Are we playing our part in building a system that will provide consistent, accurate, high-quality data on carbon emissions across the public sector to support transparency and scrutiny?
- Do we know what the existing data is telling us and what further data do we need to support decision making?
- Based on our understanding of our own data, do we have plans in place to take appropriate action?
- How can we improve our understanding of emissions resulting from our supply chain and relevant third parties?



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8 [Welsh Government, A route map for decarbonisation across the Welsh public sector \(Appendix A\), May 2021.](#)



# Appendices

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- 1 Audit approach and methods**
- 2 Legislative and policy framework underpinning decarbonisation**
- 3 The public sector route map and reporting guide**

# 1 Audit approach and methods

In November 2021, we issued a call for evidence to 48 public bodies, asking questions about their baseline position in achieving the 2030 collective ambition. Most public bodies responded in the period December 2021 to January 2022. We sent the call for evidence to the bodies covered by the [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#) at the time. This included all principal councils, fire and rescue authorities, national park authorities, health boards and NHS trusts, and the larger Welsh Government sponsored bodies.

We also sent the call for evidence to the Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust, Digital Health and Care Wales, and Health Education and Improvement Wales to ensure we had a more complete picture across the NHS. We also sent the call for evidence to NHS Wales Shared Services Partnership (NWSSP), which is an independent mutual organisation, owned and directed by NHS Wales, that delivers a range of services for and on behalf of NHS Wales. NWSSP is hosted by and operates under the legal framework of Velindre University NHS Trust, which is itself covered by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

We received responses from all bodies that were sent the call for evidence, although in a small number of instances not all questions were answered. Where questions were not answered by all public bodies, this is set out in a note to each relevant graph.

To inform our work, we held discussions with relevant stakeholders including the Welsh Government, the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, representatives of NHS Wales and the Welsh Local Government Association. We also reviewed key documents, including policies and guidance, and other relevant information provided to us by the Welsh Government and other stakeholders.

We did not undertake a detailed review at each of the public bodies. While we have largely relied on what they reported through their call for evidence responses and any supporting documentation, we have also sought to triangulate our findings through discussions with stakeholders and evidence from our wider document and data review. We also shared and discussed our emerging findings at a public webinar held in May 2022. 109 people from outside Audit Wales attended the webinar, representing a range of public, private and third sector organisations.

As stated earlier in this report, the Auditor General for Wales has committed to a long-term programme of work on climate change. We have already reported on the decarbonisation efforts of fire and rescue authorities, we have begun to review council decarbonisation action plans and we are preparing a report on flood risk management. Following a recent consultation on our future work programme, we are considering our next steps in relation to auditing actions to decarbonise and to adapt to the changes already happening to our climate.

## 2 Legislative and policy framework underpinning decarbonisation

The graphic below sets out the key legislation, policies and guidance related to decarbonisation and climate change that apply across the Welsh public sector. We refer to sector-specific legislation and policies in the main body of this report where relevant.



### April 2016

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 came into force and required public bodies covered by the Act to act in accordance with the sustainable development principle. The five ways of working set out in the Act aim to help bodies work together better, avoid repeating past mistakes and tackle long-term challenges.

### March 2019

The Welsh Government published the first statutory Low Carbon Delivery Plan, Prosperity for All: A Low Carbon Wales (LCDP1).

### November 2019

The Welsh Government published Prosperity for All: A Climate Conscious Wales, its most recent climate adaptation plan.



### March 2016

The Environment (Wales) Act 2016 came into force and placed a duty on Welsh Ministers to set targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and to set carbon budgets.

### July 2017

The Welsh Government set an ambition of achieving a carbon neutral public sector by 2030.

### April 2019

The Welsh Government made a Climate Emergency Declaration.



### March 2021

Following advice from the Climate Change Committee in December 2020, the Welsh Government set new legal targets for a 63% carbon reduction by 2030, 89% by 2040, and 100% by 2050.

### May 2021

The Welsh Government published the [Welsh public sector net zero reporting guide and the net zero carbon reporting spreadsheet](#). **Appendix 3** provides further detail.



### June 2021

The Welsh Government published its [Programme for Government 2021-2026](#) which puts tackling the climate and nature emergencies at the heart of the new government and makes a series of commitments to embed climate change in a number of ways.

### July 2021

The Welsh Government published [Net zero carbon status by 2030: A route map for decarbonisation across the Welsh public sector](#). **Appendix 3** provides further detail.



### October 2021

The Welsh Government published [Net Zero Wales Carbon Budget 2 \(2021 to 2025\)](#). This sets out specific policies for the public sector, including a target for decarbonisation plans to be in place by March 2023, targets relating to buildings, vehicles and procurement, and development of a new health and social care decarbonisation plan.

### July 2022

The Welsh Government published updated versions of the [Welsh public sector net zero reporting guide](#) and the net zero carbon reporting spreadsheet.

### 3 The public sector route map and reporting guide

To support the public sector to achieve net zero, the Welsh Government published its [public sector route map](#) in July 2021. The route map sets out four priority areas for action: buildings, mobility and transport, procurement, and land use. It also sets out key milestones for the public sector to achieve, which are:



2021-  
2022

**Moving up a gear:** Where understanding the context and what needs to be done is vital, and where action needs to accelerate.



2022-  
2026

**Well on our way:** Where there is an expectation that low carbon is becoming the norm and the public sector is definitely on the way to net zero.



2026-  
2030

**Achieving our goal:** Where choosing zero carbon has become routine, culturally embedded, and self-regulating.

In May 2021, the Welsh Government published the [Welsh Public Sector Net Zero Carbon Reporting Guide](#). The aim of the guide is to develop a universal set of instructions for use by public bodies to assist in meeting the 2030 collective ambition, in particular to:

- **Baseline:** To understand the current situation and quantify organisational emissions and removals for a consistently drawn boundary. And to quantify the likely emission gap to carbon neutral operations by 2030.
- **Identify mitigation potential:** An assessment to identify significant sources of emissions enabling organisations and the public sector to prioritise action needed to move to carbon neutral operations by 2030.
- **Monitor progress:** A need to gather, collate and analyse data to assess whether organisations are on track to achieving their goal of carbon neutrality by 2030.

Alongside the guide, the Welsh Government published the [Net zero carbon reporting spreadsheet](#) for use by public bodies to capture and report their emissions data in a consistent way. The Welsh Government asked public bodies to submit the first data by October 2021 for the 2020-21 financial year. The second submission is required by September 2022 for the 2021-22 financial year.

The guide states that public bodies should report actions to reduce emissions and move to carbon neutral operations by 2030, but the format and narrative of that reporting are not prescribed. The guide does suggest it could be in the form of an annual report on progress against a published action plan or a separate document. It also suggests that management information used in collating an emissions report will provide a good basis for the narrative report. As part of our work, we have not reviewed any narrative reports produced by public bodies, although **paragraphs 34-38** of this report comment on the challenges relating to the carbon emissions data and reporting. Following feedback from public bodies and a review of the first year's data submissions, the Welsh Government published revised reporting guidance in July 2022.





Audit Wales

24 Cathedral Road

Cardiff

CF11 9LJ

Tel: 029 2032 0500

Fax: 029 2032 0600

Textphone: 029 2032 0660

We welcome telephone calls in  
Welsh and English.

E-mail: [info@audit.wales](mailto:info@audit.wales)

Website: [www.audit.wales](http://www.audit.wales)