

Briefing

Climate change – Prospect's position



Prospect has always been led by evidence, and the evidence shows that the world is facing a climate emergency that requires significant and urgent action.

This is an important issue for us:

- We are the leading trade union for science, engineering and the environmental workforce, representing around 50,000 STEM professionals across key sectors of the economy.
- Our members provide the UK's environmental and energy infrastructure – from the scientists that first discovered the hole in the ozone layer, through the advisers and regulators providing environmental stewardship and protection, to first responders in times of emergency.
- The science demands more ambition to deliver on the UK's carbon obligations. Alongside this, we need the engineering and technical expertise to provide practical solutions.

We believe this gives our union a unique insight into the challenges we face and how we can overcome them.

Just transition

The costs of inaction are unacceptably high but we also have a responsibility to ensure that the costs of transition are managed fairly.

Following trade union pressure, the concept of a just transition was included in the preamble to the 2015 Paris Agreement and in the Silesia Declaration at the climate talks in 2018.

This states that ‘Considering the social aspect of the transition towards a low-carbon economy is crucial for gaining social approval for the changes taking place. Public policies to reduce emissions will face social resistance and significant political risks for the governments implementing them if they are not accompanied by social security programmes for workers whose jobs will be lost or transformed. For these reasons, the issue of fair transition is a vital issue for governments, social partners and civil society organisations’.

It is clear that climate ambition and just transition must be tackled together. Prospect has worked with the other energy unions to produce [a joint statement](#) on just transition and led the work on a TUC statement <http://bit.ly/tuc-greener-fairer> As stated there “The test for any just transition is whether those most affected are allowed to lead the debate and have ownership of the priorities. If not, it cannot be a just transition”.

Accelerating progress

The School Strike for Climate and activism from Extinction Rebellion and other groups have generated welcome attention on the need to accelerate progress, culminating in the government’s commitment to accept the recommendation of the Climate Change Committee (CCC) and legislate for net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

It is sometimes argued that the UK needs to move to net zero much more quickly than this. The Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has identified a number of beneficial impacts that could result from limiting the increase in global emissions to 1.5°C, including a lower rise in global sea levels and mitigating the impact on eco-systems. However the IPCC also warns that, even if technically achievable, this would require “rapid and far-reaching” transitions in land, energy, industry, buildings, transport, and cities. Similarly the CCC cautions that “net-zero is only credible if policies are introduced to match. Existing ambitions must be delivered in full, challenges that have so far been out of scope must now be confronted”.

Prospect supports this conclusion and believes there is more that we can do to advance decarbonising our society while promoting justice in our economy. However, the realities of a hard or no deal Brexit Britain will undoubtedly make this more difficult.

Advocating for climate action

We have already been active in making the case to government, business and decision-makers about the urgency of the climate challenge. Prospect wants to see:

- Further growth in renewables capacity as set out in our policy pamphlets ‘[A sustainable future for UK energy](#)’ and ‘[Act now to re-energise UK renewables](#)’. This must include greater investment in R&D, for example to deliver large scale energy storage solutions as affordable prices.

- An energy policy that delivers investment and low-carbon infrastructure, including new nuclear. Both the CCC and National Grid's analysis of Future Energy Scenarios recognise that achievement of net zero emissions depends on availability of a balance of low carbon energy sources, including nuclear and Carbon Capture Usage and Storage (CCUS). By contrast Germany, despite major investment in renewables, often generates at higher carbon intensity than either the UK or France because it relies so heavily on coal for back up.

National Grid: The electricity system will need to operate using only zero carbon generation. The greatest decarbonisation of the electricity sector will be achieved through high growth of renewable generation, nuclear capacity and interconnection as well as the use of carbon capture usage and storage with gas-fired generation.

CCC: A decarbonised power sector that is not properly managed could put security of supply at risk. integration costs could be around £10-25/MWh - even at penetrations of renewables of 50-65%

- A more rounded assessment of the costs of investment in energy infrastructure, recognising that these can be very high, especially for trailblazer projects, but tend to reduce over time. For example there are still existing contracts for offshore wind in excess of £100/MWh in addition to Renewables Obligation payments, whereas the newest installations operate at around half that price. A similar scale of cost reduction may be anticipated for Sizewell C if a Regulated Asset Base (RAB) pricing model is adopted. Costs for all infrastructure projects could be reduced even further if released from the requirement to service private sector finance.
- A more direct role for government, including a road map to ensure that the UK can become net zero in carbon emissions by 2050 and a willingness to intervene directly where needed to secure investment and provide the basis for a low carbon industrial strategy. This should include measures to ensure high quality, unionised employment and an end to offshoring of jobs and skills.
- An end to the public sector cuts, including fair pay for public service staff and investment in science and the environmental agencies and their staff who protect our natural world. The next Spending Review should commit to a level of financial provision that recognises the importance and urgency of this need. It should also commission a comprehensive audit to inform a co-ordinated and prioritised approach to investment in the skills required for decarbonisation.
- Development of a Just Transition strategy for workers facing change, including a commitment to decent work and investment in communities. The workers most affected must have a seat at the table where key decisions are taken. They should be able to contribute to solutions, not be told after decisions have been made.

