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How to reframe energy policy towards wellbeing within planetary boundaries

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential for an alternative framing for energy policy based on a sustainable and inclusive wellbeing approach. Rather than prioritising economic growth, this approach recognises the need to meet the social needs of all people within planetary boundaries and assigns equal weight to goals of decarbonisation, fairness, and security or resilience within energy policy priorities.

This reframing implies a greater emphasis on demand-side solutions to address *efficiency*, such as more rapid domestic retrofitting to reduce energy use and bills, *technological shift*, such as adopting heat pumps, electric vehicles and public transport, *flexibility*, such as demand response and time-of-use pricing, and *sufficiency*, such as promoting walking and cycling, and reduced working hours. Together, these measures can improve wellbeing for citizens by delivering a wider range of social, environmental and economic co-benefits, and would enable:

- (1) A more feasible ramp-up of renewable electricity generation options to meet lower total energy demand;
- (2) Reduced or avoided need for risky engineered ‘negative emissions’ solutions;
- (3) Improved energy security and resilience by promoting reliable, affordable and sustainable energy service provision.

This is illustrated by analysis of current and recent discourses for UK energy policy, which provide mixed narratives relating to different policy goals. On taking power in July 2024, the new Labour government set ‘Make Britain a clean energy superpower’ as one of its six missions. This emphasised *energy security*, *lower bills* and *opportunities for growth and good jobs* from investment in renewable energy and other low-carbon energy supply technologies. Recent policy documents such as the Warm Homes Plan (2026) aims to *cut bills, tackle fuel poverty, create good jobs, and deliver energy security and help address climate crisis*, and the Local Power Plan (2026) is framed as *giving power back to communities, cutting bills and transforming communities, creating local jobs and strengthening energy security*. Whilst these are important goals, the resulting priorities tend to be focussed on expansion of clean energy supply technologies, with only limited attention to energy efficiency improvements, mainly for low-income households, and no mention of sufficiency in relation to avoiding any energy- and carbon-intensive activities.

References

- Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (2026) Warm Homes Plan. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/warm-homes-plan>.
- Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (2026) Local Power Plan. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-power-plan>.