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# Policy brief

## The Reform UK party's approach to climate change and net zero in local councils

### Summary

- In May 2025 Reform UK won majorities in 10 of 23 councils up for election in England. Among the party's election promises were to "scrap net zero to cut your energy bills".
- Reform UK does not currently have a clear, explicit position on climate change but there is evidence to indicate the party and its councils may be returning to the 'denialist' stance that rejects anthropogenic climate change.
- Seven Reform UK-led councils have "scrapped" their climate targets and climate change denial has been expressed by Reform UK councillors in five councils. Some of these councils have removed content about climate change from strategy documents.
- While work related to reducing greenhouse gas emissions continues in these councils, mitigating climate change is no longer explicitly cited as the motivation.
- However, there is variation in how "scrapping net zero" is being implemented, reflecting an apparent divergence of views within the party.
- There is also a lack of clarity in the party's claims of how "scrapping net zero" has achieved financial savings and how the party defines expenditure on net zero.
- Reform UK is likely to win control of more local authorities in May 2026, including further unitary authorities with responsibilities for planning applications and housing, policy areas of importance to national climate targets.
- National government will face greater challenges in ensuring that local authorities contribute to the delivery of legislative and policy climate goals if Reform UK wins more seats.
- The Government should consider strategic options including incentives to promote progress, rather than assuming voluntary action, and making standardised emissions reporting mandatory, to track progress of programmes that reduce emissions.
- Reform UK should clarify its position on net zero expenditure to avoid misleading voters about its campaign pledges.

**Policy briefs** provide analysis on topical issues, presenting specific recommendations to inform ongoing policy debates. Drawing on the Grantham Research Institute's expertise, they summarise either our research findings or the state of knowledge about a particular issue.

This policy brief was written by **Edward de Quay** and **Pallavi Sethi**.

## Introduction

On 1 May 2025, Reform UK won majorities in 10 of the 23 councils holding elections in England, and were the largest party in a further four, taking 41% of contested seats (see Figure 1).

Although national opinion polls reflect a changing electoral landscape following the Green Party's win in the Gorton and Denton Parliamentary by-election on 26 February 2026, Reform UK has maintained its overall lead. With the party likely to take control of more councils in May 2026, this brief examines how its pledge to "scrap net zero" has been implemented by Reform-led local authorities, and what might be expected from the party's future administrations.

The study considered nine of the ten councils with a Reform UK majority,<sup>1</sup> analysing party literature, council documents and websites, press and social media statements. We have focused on relevant council debates about the removal of climate targets or climate commitments, particularly Climate Emergency Declarations, net zero and carbon neutrality targets, and efforts to mitigate climate change.

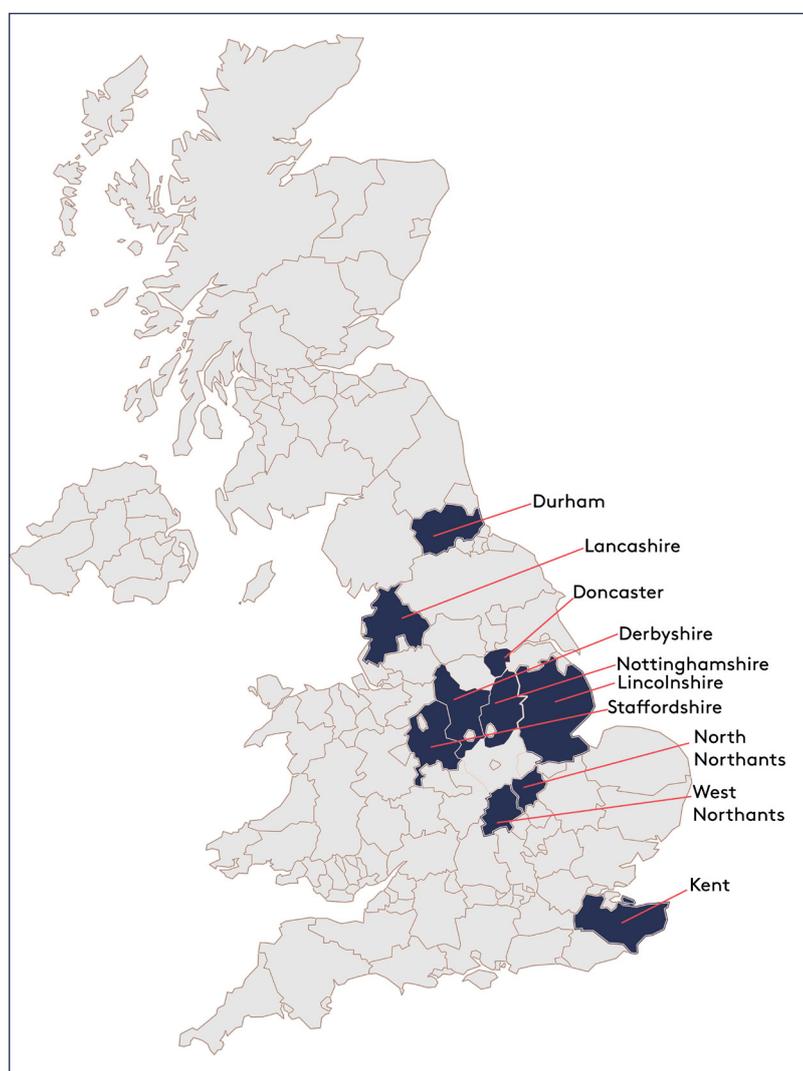
Since the May 2025 elections, seven of the 10 Reform-run councils have scrapped their emissions targets. Three have removed Climate Emergency Declarations, three have removed or restructured climate-related committees, and most have removed language relating to climate change and decarbonisation when updating their strategy (see Table 1).

Deputy Leader of Reform UK, Richard Tice, has referred to an "extreme cult of Net Zero" (Tice, 2024). Much of the party's local election literature in 2025 reflected this stance, promising to "scrap Net Zero to cut your energy bills" and "reduce waste and cut your taxes" (Election Leaflets, 2025).

Reform-run councils have, however, since raised council tax. Responding to questions about these rises, the party's leader Nigel Farage confirmed in March 2026 that "we sent out literature with national messaging, which said 'end net zero' ... and 'cut taxes'. ... On individual county messaging, we said nothing of the kind" (Sky News, 2026). Indicating a lack of alignment within the party, Mark Annull, Reform UK Leader of West Northamptonshire Council, stated in July 2025 that "on the 1st of May, net zero was on the back of every leaflet produced by Reform UK. And every resident who voted Reform UK voted for that, and they must be heard" (Annull, 2025).

In May 2026, approximately 5,000 seats in 136 local councils are up for election. This election is thus larger overall in scale than in 2025 and includes a greater proportion of unitary councils with responsibility for

Figure 1. Councils in England won by Reform UK in the May 2025 local elections



1. The City of Doncaster was excluded from the analysis as it has a Labour Mayor and cabinet, limiting the powers of the Reform UK majority on the council.

Table 1. Overview of approach to climate targets in the 10 councils over which Reform UK has full control

|                                     | City of Doncaster (Metropolitan borough) | Derbyshire (County)        | Durham (Unitary)  | Kent (County)              | Lancashire (County)              | Lincolnshire (County) | Nottinghamshire (County)                                    | North Northamptonshire (Unitary)                                  | West Northamptonshire (Unitary)                       | Staffordshire (County)     |
|-------------------------------------|--|----------------------------|---|----------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|---|---|---|----------------------------|
| Climate Emergency Declaration       | Retained                                 | n/a                        | Removed   | Removed                    | Retained                         | n/a                   | n/a   | Retained  | n/a   | Removed                    |
| Net zero/ carbon neutrality targets | Retained                                 | Unclear                    | Removed   | Removed                    | Removed                          | Removed               | Removed   | Unclear   | Removed   | Removed                    |
| Previous                            | Carbon neutral by 2040                   | Net zero by 2032 (council) | Net zero by 2030 (council)<br>Carbon neutral by 2045 (area) | Net zero by 2030 (council) | Carbon neutral by 2030 (council) | Net zero by 2050      | Carbon neutral by 2030 (council)<br>Net zero by 2050 (area) | Carbon neutral by 2030 (council)<br>Carbon neutral by 2050 (area) | Net zero by 2030 (council)<br>Net zero by 2045 (area) | Net zero by 2050 (council) |

planning applications and housing. In these policy areas, authorities may or may not agree to help to deliver national climate goals through, for example, decisions on new solar farms or promoting energy efficiency grants.

### Context: commitment to climate action at the local level

By 2021, 75% of local authorities in the UK had declared a ‘climate emergency’ (Rankl et al., 2023) and 73% of single and upper tier authorities in England had committed to carbon neutrality or net zero targets in the local authority area, of which 38% set a deadline of 2030, 20 years earlier than the national target (Davies, 2021). It has been argued that these declarations helped create the conditions that encourage reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, and normalise a framing of urgency around action on climate change (Dyson and Harvey-Scholes, 2022).

Notably, these local targets were set in the absence of statutory net zero targets for local government in the UK. While the role of local government in delivering national net zero targets is recognised as essential, the previous Conservative Government reasoned that local targets were unnecessary, as there was already a high level of local commitment being displayed (Rankl et al., 2023).

There is no mandatory requirement for local councils to report on emissions, but a recent survey found that 92% of local authorities do (Local Government Association, 2024). There are some commonly used reporting frameworks, but no standardised process. The Government is currently consulting on guidance on emissions monitoring and reporting for the public sector, with final publication due at the end of 2026

**A Climate Emergency Declaration is a formal commitment by a governing body to prioritise climate change as an urgent issue and to accelerate action to mitigate its impacts.**

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(Department for Energy Security & Net Zero, 2025). The forthcoming Local Outcomes Framework will include climate change mitigation as an item, but the Government is still considering which data should be used to measure progress (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2026).

Most councils have, therefore, been happy to progress and report on climate action voluntarily. However, lessons from a year of Reform UK administrations, and the prospect that the party will win more seats in May 2026, indicate that national government should no longer assume voluntary ambition at the local level to progress national legislative and policy goals on climate change.

## Observations from analysing Reform UK council sources and actions

### Removal of emissions targets and explicitly climate-oriented action

Seven of the nine Reform-run councils analysed have removed emissions targets. The remaining two are Derbyshire and North Northamptonshire. It is unclear if the removal of climate change and net zero from Derbyshire's updated [Council Plan](#) amounts to a de-prioritisation or rejection of its net zero 2032 target. North Northamptonshire approved the "removal" of its carbon neutrality by 2030 target, but also agreed to continue progress "aligning" with the UK net zero 2050 target. Of the nine councils studied, five inherited Climate Emergency Declarations from previous administrations and three (Durham, Kent and Staffordshire) have successfully moved to rescind these.

Eight councils have replaced mention of climate change or decarbonisation in certain documents with language related to "the environment", "sustainability" or "energy efficiency". For example, Kent County Council has replaced its [Net Zero Plan](#) with an [Energy Efficiency Plan](#) and Staffordshire's Climate Emergency Declaration has given way to a "broader more practical" [Environmental Strategy](#). Some Reform UK councillors argue that this reframing does not mean abandoning 'environmental responsibilities' (e.g. Stanfield, 2025). Staffordshire Cabinet Member for Connectivity, Andrew Mynors, has stated: "The County Council does not need a Climate Emergency and long-term Net Zero targets to fulfil our environmental responsibilities and reduce our own impact on the environment" (Mynors, 2025).

Other examples of restructuring include Derbyshire's removal of the Climate Change, Biodiversity and Carbon Reduction committee (Hazelden, 2025) and North Northamptonshire's dissolution of the Sustainable Communities Executive Advisory Panel (which included carbon reduction as a performance metric) (North Northamptonshire Council, 2025a). These shifts make clear the intention of Reform UK councils to remove explicit attention on climate change and carbon management.

### A strengthening of climate 'denialism'

Within the realm of climate misinformation, a broad shift has been observed away from climate change 'denial', which is an outright rejection of the reality or human causation of climate change, to climate change 'delay', which accepts the existence of climate change but justifies inaction or inadequate efforts (Lamb et al., 2020). Earlier analyses have

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argued that climate change denial has been strategically sidelined due to low salience in UK climate politics (e.g. Paterson et al., 2024).

Reform UK does not currently have a clear and explicit position on climate change overall – and statements denying the existence of anthropogenic climate change were removed from its ‘Our Contract with You’ document in 2024 when Nigel Farage became leader (Ward and Sethi, 2024). However, there is evidence to indicate the party and its councils may be returning to the ‘denialist’ stance that rejects anthropogenic climate change.

Reform councillors in five of the studied councils have used language that could be categorised as climate change denial: Kent, Durham, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Lancashire. For example, in September 2025 Kent County Council noted “the unproven view of anthropogenic (human-induced) climate change” in a motion to rescind the county’s Climate Emergency Declaration (Hespe and Chamberlain, 2025), citing several widely discredited sources. (For further examples, see Box 1.)

Social media has been used by Reform UK councillors to spread denialist views. For instance, Kent county councillor David Wimble shared a Facebook post highlighting a “Climate Catastrophe Hoax”, where “the climate apocalypse narrative is exaggerated, wrong, and built on fear rather than fact” (Wimble, 2025). Lancashire councillor Nigel Swales shared another Facebook post stating that “Reform UK fully accepts

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### Box 1. Selected quotes from Reform UK

“Now, we want to talk about climate change in County Durham. During the Roman occupied era, not far away from County Durham, around 45 AD, there is evidence of Roman Vineyards along Hadrian's wall. I want to bring this to your attention. This is because the Roman period in Britain is known for having a relatively warm climate, which would have been conducive to growing grapes. Mind how the climate has changed, Darren.”

**Andrew Husband, Leader of Durham County Council, addressing council meeting on 16 July 2025.** See: [YouTube](#) [from 1:39:16].

“Kent County Council declared a ‘climate emergency’ in 2019. Since then, the Council has had no discernible effect on the world’s climate. However, the impact of this designation has been that KCC has endorsed the unproven view of anthropogenic (human-induced) climate change, pushed that narrative through its policies and practices such as in procurement to the detriment of small, local suppliers; scared numerous young people, and had the effect of disallowing proper and reasoned debate on alternative viewpoints.”

**Kent County Council Motion for Time Limited Debate: Rescinding the KCC Climate Emergency Declaration (proposed by Chris Hespe).** See: [council document](#)

“I've been involved in award-winning sustainability projects for 25 years, and I've never seen such nonsense as the anthropogenic global warming hoax. The statistics are manipulated. I've followed it over decades. There's lots of science out there. But at the moment, it seems to be as in a lot of matters with Covid, if you follow the money, you find the science or the pseudoscience and you'll also find Greta Thunberg. Now there are a lot of advocates of that kind of thing because people have been brainwashed over time through the media. We as a party stand against net zero. ... They'll have us back living in mud huts – if even living at all – by the time they're done.”

**Bert Bingham, Transport and Environment Minister, Nottinghamshire County Council, addressing council meeting on 10 July 2025.** See: [YouTube](#) [from 2:01:44].

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that climate change is real, after all it has happened for millions of years based on multiple factors completely outside human control or influence” (Swales, 2025).

### **An inconsistent approach to “scrapping net zero”**

Interpretations of the pledge to “scrap net zero” appear to vary across the councils. For example, Lancashire and North Northamptonshire have yet to remove their Climate Emergency Declarations whereas it appeared important to do so for Durham, Kent and Staffordshire. Kent has committed to keeping emissions reporting as a key performance indicator (Kent County Council, 2026), while Lancashire County Council resolved to ask its Cabinet to cease voluntary carbon reporting (Lancashire County Council, 2025).

North Northamptonshire voted to “remove the current 2030 target” but will also “continue to progress the CMP [Carbon Management Plan] aligning with the prevailing UK statutory target to be ‘net zero’”. The council states on its website that it aims to “become a carbon-neutral council by 2050” (North Northamptonshire Council, 2025a, b). The leaders of Derbyshire and Staffordshire County Councils have also said they will meet legal emissions obligations (Derbyshire Reform Party, 2025; Staffordshire County Council, 2025). This situation highlights the importance of the Climate Change Act in maintaining local progress.

Funding for climate targets that fall earlier than 2050 remains a point of contention. West Northamptonshire has argued that “the Labour Party are not funding 2030” and therefore the council is working to the 2050 target (Stansfield, 2025). Lincolnshire has said it would continue to reduce carbon usage but would not support schemes unless funded by central government (Lincolnshire County Council, 2026b).

### **Misleading voters over “savings” from “scrapping net zero”**

It is often unclear what Reform UK councils count as ‘net zero spend’ and how they account for savings supposedly achieved by removing climate-related targets. Our analysis did not reveal detailed estimates of projected savings accompanying motions related to climate ambition rollback, and in some cases headline figures have been disputed.

Richard Tice held a press conference in November 2025 to discuss over £300 million in savings identified by councils run by Reform UK since that May (Reform UK, 2025). He did not mention savings from net zero, despite the party’s emphasis on this alleged benefit. Kent County Council had already announced £40 million saved “over 4 years by rescinding net zero targets” (Kent County Council, 2025), relating to “cancelled” renewable energy projects on council buildings and its electric vehicle transition (Martin, 2025). However, these were shown to have been “potential capital projects” that had not been allocated funding (Walker, 2026). Similarly, Durham County Council identified savings of over £3 million in decarbonisation and energy efficiency programmes, but said that its analysis had focused on “schemes which are not currently contractually committed, and which do not meet the new Cabinet’s priorities” (Durham County Council, 2025c).

Headline figures may also mislead by including savings in wider budget lines. For example, a council budget savings report from October 2025 for Derbyshire County Council shows delivered savings in the Net Zero and

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Environment budget of just over £1 million. Only a quarter of this is due to restructuring ‘climate change work’, with the remainder largely relating to waste management. In total, savings of nearly £11 million are targeted, but with nearly £9 million alone from transferring packaging waste management costs to producers (Derbyshire County Council, 2025e).

## Conclusion and recommendations

The key finding from this study is that councils led by Reform UK are largely delivering on the party’s pledge to scrap net zero at the local level, and that “scrapping net zero” is not only a policy position but a signal of a broader retreat from taking climate change seriously. This takes the form of both climate change delay, where commitments are weakened or deferred, and outright climate change denial, where the anthropogenic origin of climate change is rejected. Voters should be aware that this is the case, despite the party’s lack of an explicit position on climate change.

The promotion of climate change denial by both its national leadership and many of its local councillors indicates that Reform UK is failing to recognise the growing risks the British public face from climate change impacts, including rising sea levels, heavier rainfall and more intense heatwaves. It also demonstrates that the party does not accept the need for evidence-based policymaking.

If Reform UK expands its council base in the upcoming local elections, further climate target rollback, the dismantling of scrutiny structures and the withdrawal of voluntary emissions reporting should be expected. Given the vital role local authorities need to play in helping the UK reach its statutory target of net zero emissions by 2050, the Government should consider strategic options including incentives to promote progress, rather than assuming voluntary action, and making standardised emissions reporting mandatory, to track progress of programmes that reduce emissions.

The differences in implementation by Reform UK councils of “scrap net zero” implies that differences of opinion exist within the party, and opportunities to promote climate action may be found. These opportunities could include focusing on areas of policy overlap that deliver on emissions without relying on a net zero framing, such as through the ‘Warm Homes: Local Grants’. To encourage local authorities to continue taking responsibility for emissions reductions, regardless of framing, priority should also be given to standardising emissions monitoring and reporting guidance for local authority use. The experience of Kent County Council, which has retained emissions as a Key Performance Indicator, shows that this can be welcome in Reform UK-led councils under the right circumstances.

Lastly, Reform UK should provide greater clarity in how it accounts for supposed savings from scrapping net zero, and what it includes and excludes under this budget line, to provide complete clarity to voters.

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The views expressed in this brief represent those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the host institutions or funders. The authors declare no conflict of interest in the preparation of this brief.

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