

Policy brief:

Workers, trade unions and Just Transition in the UK

Just Transition is contested. We draw on examples from the UK and across the world to bring clarity to the varieties of Just Transitions and what effective mechanisms can support a fair and just transition for workers to inform policy in the UK.

Context: climate policy and worker voice in the UK

The UK was an early adopter of climate goals setting out legally binding targets in the Climate Change Act of 2008 and has the ambition to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. Key policy to achieve this is set out in the Net Zero Strategy ([HM Government, 2021](#)) and revised in [Powering Up Britain: The Net Zero Growth Plan](#) (HM Government 2023). Despite significant carbon emission reductions and achievement of interim carbon targets, to date, the UK is not on track to reach its climate goals ([Climate Action Tracker, 2024](#)). The government's independent climate body, the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) estimates that [credible plans cover only a third](#) of emissions reductions needed to meet the 2030

target (then set at reducing emissions by 68% compared to 1990 levels).

Thus, significant challenges remain. The reduction in UK emissions to date has primarily been achieved through the reduction in fossil fuel generated power. Yet the CCC expects that 75% of the future emissions reductions needed will have to come from other sectors such as transport, industry, buildings and land use, areas where many key indicators also show insufficient progress. Future carbon budgets assume an increased proportion of emissions reductions via removal technologies such as carbon capture and carbon dioxide removal despite considerable doubts over the [feasibility and viability of these technologies to be ready in time to achieve climate targets](#).

Brief:

This brief sets out recommendations for enhancing workers' and trade unions' role in climate policy in the UK. The recommendations are made by the researchers in reflection of the research findings.

Content:

- Context of UK climate policy and unions
- Examples of progressive initiatives on jobs, work and skills
- Recommendations

Evidence base:

35 interviews conducted between January 2023 and June 2024 with trade union representatives, NGOs, and net zero transition experts in Wales, Scotland, and England plus desk research.

Wider study:

The UK Brief is based on research the Just Transitions - a Global Exploration project based at the University of Leeds.

A further brief summarising good examples from other countries will be published in 2025.

Thanks to the participants of a Workshop in January 2025 for their input on an earlier draft of this brief.

The Labour government elected in July 2024, has made accelerating to net zero one of its main priorities. At COP29, [the Prime Minister announced](#) a more ambitious target for emission reduction by 2035 (to an 81% cut from 1990 levels, up from 75%), and a raft of policy announcements includes establishing Great British Energy and the National Wealth Fund to accelerate investment in renewable energy, the removal of planning restrictions on investment in public infrastructure, and support for home insulation, sustainable aviation, bio-diversity and land management. New policy design such as the Clean Industry Bonus also signals a stronger interventionist stance to incentivise shorter (local) and more sustainable supply chains (DESNZ, 2024) with the hope of increasing job opportunities in disadvantaged regions. Clean energy is viewed as a key sector in outline plans for an Industrial Strategy which targets sub-sectors offering growth potential ([UK Government, 2024](#)).

Within this wider policy arena, getting climate policy actors to seriously engage with unions on the issue of equity and justice has been an ongoing challenge. Generally, UK unions have been in an anti-union environment with limited

opportunities to participate in climate policy-making despite a long-established policy dialogue within the UK labour movement on environmental issues. The de-facto exclusion of unions from wider public policy-making over the last 15-20 years has created a considerable gap in understanding and erosion of trust between unions and other stakeholders.

New public bodies such as the Office for Clean Energy Jobs within DESNZ, Industrial Strategy Advisory Council and Skills England mention the need to work with unions, which signals a change in approach, see for example [Skills England, 2024 p43](#). But how these new regulatory and policy commitments unfold and the role of unions within them remains to be seen.

UK unions are diverse, and contestations between and even within unions about the meaning of Just Transition are evident. However, they have looked to advance a collective position that places workers' interest more clearly within climate policy, engaging primarily through the lens of jobs, skills and training, but also on social justice and political agendas around public ownership and the need to roll back earlier waves of privatisation as a route to more rapid action on climate change.

There has also been a notable assertion of the role that unions and workers in both the industrial and public sectors can play in accelerating the transition to net zero and beyond.

While there are elements of more transformational politics within union policy positions, less emphasis is placed in UK union climate policy on an 'eco-social' transition (in the sense that the needs of the environment are balanced with those of social justice) when compared to positions of labour movements across the globe, reviewed as part of our wider study.

A notable dimension of the review of Just Transition in the UK is the difference in approach taken in the devolved nations and regions. In Scotland, there is direct engagement of unions via a Just Transition Commission. In Wales, there is legislation on the wellbeing of future generations that drives public policy to consider, amongst other measures, the impact of climate transitions. Two achievements to keep up with in other nations.





Three examples of progressive initiatives

The lack of national or sectoral institutions that could form the basis of union-management and state dialogue on climate and just transitions has driven UK unions and others such as combined and local authorities, communities and NGOs to experiment with new forms of collaboration. Our research has examined a number of positive pro-active examples of union engagement on net zero. These could provide a blueprint for policy initiatives and ways that the Government and unions could work together to give these positive test cases wider national reach.

Supporting Worker Transitions - Skills Passports

When workers want to make a transition for example out of fossil fuel production sectors into new areas of work, they may need support to both find opportunities and understand how their existing experience and skills match the requirements of new and emerging jobs. When investigating the [transition challenges of North Sea oil workers](#), Platform (a green NGO) and the union, RMT identified various issues, including the barriers workers face in the transition into 'green' sectors of having to pay for costly training and accreditations for competencies they already had. The unions and NGOs have successfully advocated for greater coherence in the training system. Sector bodies that set the training requirements, such as Offshore Energies UK and Renewables UK are now part of the workforce strategy contained within the North Sea Transition

Deal (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2022) and Skills Passports were launched in January 2025. [Skills Passports](#) enable the documentation of accredited competencies of those leaving oil and gas to be recognised in other sectors such as off-shore wind. This model could be expanded to a wider range of sectors facing skills shortages such as onshore engineering, transport, construction and vehicle and boiler production. The role of NGOs and unions in campaigning for these changes and working directly with affected workers to understand in detail the issues and barriers faced in skills transitions needs greater recognition and to be embedded within future policy design.

Embedding Just Transition in climate plans - Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission

In 2015, the regional TUC participated in a [European Union and ETUC study](#) of the implications for jobs and skills of addressing decarbonisation in the seven most heavily

carbon-emitting industrial regions of which Yorkshire and the Humber (Y&H) was one. This work helped establish a network of shop stewards and union officials in the 'high carbon' industries in the region. Working with experts in climate finance and green jobs helped to build awareness and union responses to change, such as the closure of coal-fired power stations and new employment opportunities through the expansion of offshore renewables in the North Sea.

This work also fed directly into the guiding principles of the emergent [regional climate commission](#). Without clarity in UK climate policy, regional bodies including universities, combined and local authorities, climate NGOs, businesses and the TUC established the Y&H Climate Commission and developed a regional climate plan.

The TUC also supports business engagement in the Y&HCC [climate action pledge](#) and is working with [unions and local authorities on plans to develop social](#)



Our research has examined a number of positive pro-active examples of union engagement on net zero.

[housing retrofit](#) at scale. This work also includes training union green reps who engage with members and management on workplace decarbonisation. This illustrates the potential for unions to contribute to place-based climate plans and connect workplace and climate justice themes.

Working at the national scale - The Scottish Just Transition Commission

Scotland has been a frontrunner in just transition policy-making as there is now the legal obligation to consider the impact of decarbonisation on regions and sectors and to propose policies that mitigate against those impacts. The Scottish Just Transition Partnership was a formal alliance between environmental NGOs (ENGOs) and unions that advocated for just transition to be a feature of climate policy in Scotland. The Scottish Just Transition Commission (SJTC) was established in 2018 and began work in 2019, tasked with supporting and monitoring the government's Just Transition plans ([Just Transition Commission, 2021](#)). While the Commission that brings ENGOs, unions, businesses and government together is a good model in principle, it has lacked power and political influence to affect substantive change to the ways that climate and economic policy impact on workers. More concrete actions to support workers were laid out by the Commission.

The constructive critique of the



government laid out by the SJTC has led to a much more sustained response to the prospect of closure of the Grangemouth refinery including consultation on a [Just Transition plan for the Industrial cluster around Grangemouth](#) with broader representation of the unions and community organisations engaged in local governance, and additional funding for a local growth plan supported with the national wealth fund. Yet refinery workers are already under notice of redundancy. Collaboration is needed to develop direct intervention to support those workers but with much greater urgency from all concerned.

The initiatives such as the three noted above are often new territory for

unions and other stakeholders working collaboratively. These collaborations are also vulnerable due to limited resources and lack of supporting infrastructure. It will be vital to have more effective co-ordination across workplace, regional, sectoral and national levels both in unions and with other stakeholders to enable partners to respond more rapidly to support workers and communities made vulnerable during the net zero transition.

The following sets out recommendations for government and unions on how to build on the learning from these initiatives to scale up and speed up the transition process.



We have developed a set of recommendations for UK government and trade unions. These recommendations are

informed by our research in the UK and other countries.

Set the vision for the future

Green economy programmes must enable current and future generations in deprived communities to flourish through access to good quality jobs, raised incomes, aspirations and living standards. Well-designed and resourced green infrastructural policies can address significant regional inequalities (which have resulted from previous rounds of industrial restructuring or 'unjust' transitions). Other nations of the UK should follow

the example of Wales, which introduced a [Wellbeing of Future Generations Act \(2015\)](#) requiring public bodies to consider the long-term impact of their decisions and to work more effectively with communities to address persistent problems, including poverty, health inequalities and climate change and a just and fair transition. Similarly, embedding Just Transition within climate law, as in Scotland, gives a clear signal to the public and those designing and implementing climate policy of the importance of these themes.

Improve coordination

Climate targets are ambitious, but shifting and complex departmental responsibilities have created inconsistency and disconnected policy and action. The clean energy mission of the government needs to integrate environment, transport, industry, housing and education. More coordination is needed notably between the Departments for Energy Security and Net Zero, the Department for Work and Pensions, Department of Transport, Department of Business and Trade, Department of Science, Innovation and Technology, Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Department of Housing Communities and Local Government, Department for Education and the Treasury. In addition to national policy, the many localised climate action efforts at combined and local authority level need more co-ordination and an enhanced capacity of local government to act on climate by greater powers and funding to re-build capacity. A new coordinating body is needed to coordinate action linking departments and key agencies around industrial strategy, jobs and skills provision (linking DESNZ with DEFRA, DfE, DHCLG and DWP).

Institutionalise collaboration on Just Transition via a national Commission

In the absence of formal dialogue mechanisms on climate, UK unions have

looked to develop alternative institutions through which to advance action on climate and jobs. Many of these collaborative activities tend to be ad-hoc, opportunistic and focused fairly narrowly on work and job transitions rather than wider engagement on climate policy. A national JT Commission is needed, building on the lessons learned from the Scottish Just Transition Commission and best practice in similar developments internationally. Input from a variety of stakeholders would enhance worker participation and buy-in for climate mitigation measures. There are examples where governments have given high priority to Just Transition Commissions such as South Africa's [Presidential Climate Commission](#) bringing together unions, NGOs, business leaders, and key policy-makers it would be essential to monitor the implementation of a UK Commission goals and outcomes.

Strengthen TUSDAC as ministerial advisory body

The Trade Union Sustainable Development Advisory Committee (TUSDAC) was established as a joint advisory group between environment ministers, civil servants, the TUC and union general secretaries engaging primarily in policy dialogue on energy, emissions trading scheme (ETS) and carbon pricing policy. Its status as an advisory body was downgraded in 2010, although it has continued to

promote cross-union dialogue. Some more constructive dialogue has developed under the new administration, it is vital that there is a forum where government and trade unions can discuss climate mitigation and adaptation policy and the potential for impact on and the contribution by workers to those policies. Positive examples on policy coordination can be found in the [German Coal Commission](#) or with the Spanish Territorial [Just Transition Agreements](#). Both of which have provided coordination between national climate policy ambitions, coal phase out and the closure of coal fired power, engaging locally and with unions on the design of specific interventions based on the principles of Just Transition.

Action on green jobs needs union representation

Worker-focused proposals need to be adopted as the government develops policy on green jobs and skills. The previous government efforts to identify the issues faced in the 'greening' of work had only a cursory involvement of unions. Trade unions are a key partner for achieving just transition and the proposals and initiatives unions have developed can help accelerate acceptance of net zero policies. Union representation is vital for good green jobs policy-making and workers' acceptance of those policies. Reference made to union engagement, for example, by the Office for Clean Energy Jobs and Skills England, suggests positive change to this engagement. However, greater clarity is needed on how new and established policy bodies will actively engage with unions and their proposals.

Create a Just Transition Observatory to make Just Transition initiatives known and visible

There has been a range of ad-hoc reports and analyses of the jobs and skills implications of the green transition (including by GMB, Prospect, Unite, UNISON and PCS, as well as an array of think tanks). There needs to be much greater consistency in, and a sustained analysis of, the jobs that will be impacted (both positively and negatively) by climate policy: whether it is current workers that will face



a transition through sector or occupations in decline, the need for re-skilling for new job opportunities or the future generation that will need to acquire green skills and understand new job opportunities. A Just Transition Observatory is needed as a hub to draw together relevant and accessible data and share examples of how successful just transitions have been achieved. The European Commission has agreed to establish a European Fair Transition Observatory, and Spain already has [a regional Just Transition Observatory in Asturias](#) which, since 2019, has enabled robust public-private dialogues, adhering to a cooperative model that involves the Asturias Government, NGOs, trade unions, employers, municipalities and universities.

Just Transition Strategy

Climate policy, whether national, local or at the workplace, needs to include workforce planning and pathways into new careers for workers. Just Transition plans, informed and implemented in a broad process involving multiple stakeholders, including citizens, communities, and trade unions, are a precondition for unions playing an active and constructive role in transitions vitally affecting their constituencies.

“Why would we, as a trade union, lead workers into a transition where we know there’s going to be a cliff edge? We won’t do that?”

IV12, Union Officer



Current climate policy making has offered little support for workers located in sectors that have been shrinking or face phase-out. Despite being at the sharp end of decarbonisation initiatives, minimal support has been available for energy, oil and gas workers to transition into new careers. Any transition plan needs to come with clear timelines so that realistic targets can be formulated and believed in. Unions are wary of “vague promises of retraining for jobs that do not exist”.

There is the need for a national framework for the long-term planning of just transition, including education and training, action on decent green jobs, welfare packages for workers losing their jobs or facing significant job change, coupled with support for affected communities as well as substantial funding and monitoring of the employment effects of the green transition. In Spain the climate law includes Just Transition Territorial Agreements between central and regional governments and affected localities. In Germany several regional councils for transformation have been established to coordinate action at regional level. In Chile, the Government published a [National Just Transition Strategy](#) in 2021. Investment is also needed in skills training and more effective collaboration on the design of ‘green’ training frameworks for both new entrants and the existing workforce. Every worker should have access to funding to

improve their green skills. In Germany, the so called [Transformationskurzarbeit](#), a new short-time work scheme, has been introduced to fund upskilling of workers for greener jobs with employees being released for training via a training allowance funded by the Labour Office (the German equivalent of Jobcentre Plus). In Quebec, the government is [funding the upskilling of workers for green jobs](#) which includes both training and staff wage costs while attending training.

Further, it is important for stakeholders involved to be transparent about the basis of their decision-making. Increasingly, there is a concern that the green transition is used by businesses as a ‘fig leaf’ to justify restructuring and redundancies that are due to mismanagement or economic inefficiency. Presenting this as decarbonisation can potentially create resentment towards green policy.

Statutory support for worker voice in workplace decarbonisation plans

Workplace representation on transition plans can help build engagement in just transition and design just and fair solutions. There have been positive examples of worker-led plans for the transitioning production, for example in the steel and automotive sectors that seek to balance decarbonisation plans with jobs and skills retention. Currently, worker or union-led proposals for repurposing production or re-imagining the transition do not have to be considered by employers. A strengthening of workers’ rights for voice to be heard in the design of transition plans would make decarbonisation plans both more achievable and democratic. Examples from other country cases show that this approach that is emerging elsewhere. In Quebec, a number of [Just Transition laboratories](#) serve, at workplace level, to channel worker voice to develop green transition clauses in collective agreements. In Germany, [proposals exist to extend co-determination rights](#) regarding the environmental impact of production as well as making it mandatory to establish an environmental committee in workplaces with more than 100 employees.

Statutory Recognition of Green Reps

UK trade unions have developed [a green or environmental representative \(or green rep\)](#) role. These are voluntary but elected union representatives who focus on minimising workplace carbon emissions and advocate for fairness on green issues at work. They currently do not have the right to carry out their duties. Formally recognising this role within wider workplace representation legislation would boost the legitimacy and capacity of green reps to contribute to workplace emissions reduction projects and other green initiatives. As not every workplace is unionised, the government could mandate “green champions” as a form of worker representation in companies adapting and mitigating climate change.

Ensure green jobs are good jobs

[Workers are concerned about the quality of jobs](#) in new green sectors. To make

decarbonisation an attractive prospect for workers, newly created jobs during the transition need to come with trade union recognition, decent pay, terms and conditions, high standards of health and safety, and a fair pension. There are a number of initiatives across the UK, often driven at the level of Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) aimed at improving work quality under the banner of fair or decent work. National and local action on green jobs and skills needs to link more effectively to these initiatives so that the principles of decent work are more clearly linked to the design and development of green jobs and skills and the green transition. [The US Inflation Reduction Act of 2022](#) can serve as a template.

Green and inclusive public procurement

The principle that green public investment should be conditional on businesses fulfilling decent work criteria has been a key feature of the US Inflation Reduction

Act (2022). The new [Public Procurement Act of 2023](#) in the UK offers the potential for greater flexibility in the award of public funding towards maximising public benefit. To meet the government’s target for at least 50% of the clean energy supply chain to be UK-based by 2030 and to help ensure the retention of green jobs and skills, UK Government funding needs to preference local contractors and employment when commissioning green projects, supporting decent work that enables vulnerable communities to flourish. These principles and incentives should not just be focused on the ‘clean energy’ sector but be extended to support a wider range of sectors.



Recommendations for trade unions

Integrate the green agenda

Union action on climate should not be an isolated activity but connect more clearly to both short and longer-term industrial concerns and related campaigns on pay, technology, health, equality, energy and food poverty. The capacity to negotiate over transition plans that result from decarbonisation and adaptation, especially where these may result in the reorganisation of work, new skills and working conditions, also needs to be enhanced. This can draw on the lessons learned from recent union worker-led (climate) transition initiatives such as those initiated by reps at Port Talbot

in response to the switch from blast to electric arc furnaces, or the TUC’s worker-led transition programme working with union reps in manufacturing sectors such as chemicals, glass and automotive.

Make internal union debates on Just Transition more productive and farsighted

Many aspects of just transitions are contested within and between unions and will remain so. This is a vibrant part of union democracy. But the debate is rather ‘stuck’ around sectional interests and competing visions of social and climate justice and for whom justice should be served. Some union respondents overtly express a vision for the ‘destination’ of the just transition as transformative.

Others are more focused on immediate threats to jobs in the energy and manufacturing sectors. It is understandable that protection of members’ interests in declining industries or rapidly changing sectors is prioritised and stems from negative experiences in the past. Yet, the union movement will be stronger with a vision for union climate policy in relation to the broader challenges of reducing worker precarity in the labour market as the green transformation happens, and not solely focusing on workers affected in the fossil fuel production sectors. Unions who proclaim a more transformative agenda and those unions who have fossil fuel workers at their heart, need to engage more constructively on how these

“So we do frame this as a just transformation. So, it’s not about an overtly economic transition, or just the sort of ‘green job swaps’ capitalist transition. So yeah, we are fundamentally saying this is about socialism, and changing how our society works. Across the board”.

IV22, Union Officer

apparently competing views of change can be reconciled into a unified programme of short- and longer-term action.

Worker-led alternatives to ‘new green-tech’ climate policy

Emissions reductions strategies rely heavily on the roll out of emergent technologies, notably hydrogen and carbon capture and storage, despite significant doubts about the feasibility and economic viability of scaling up these technologies quickly in time to meet climate targets. Trade unions should engage more deeply with the conversation around alternative climate strategies based on feasible alternatives like circularity, resource efficiency and alternative ways of consumption. Unions need to lead the conversation on what these alternatives mean for workers, jobs and skills.

Collaborate with environmental movements

Unions and environmental groups have worked jointly to address climate and

employment issues in ways that have material benefits for workers and the environment. There is considerable scope to enhance this collaboration so that the green jobs and climate justice agendas are strengthened. Positive inspiration can be taken from Quebec and Spain where for example sustained collaboration via the Aliance por el Clima was jointly established by green NGOs and unions 2015. Dialogue between worker and climate groups has been challenging but helped improve shared understandings of how to advocate for climate and worker interests resulting in demands for decent work alongside climate policy. These are reflected in the Spanish Climate and Energy Bill of 2019 which incorporated [Just Transition within law within the climate Bill](#).

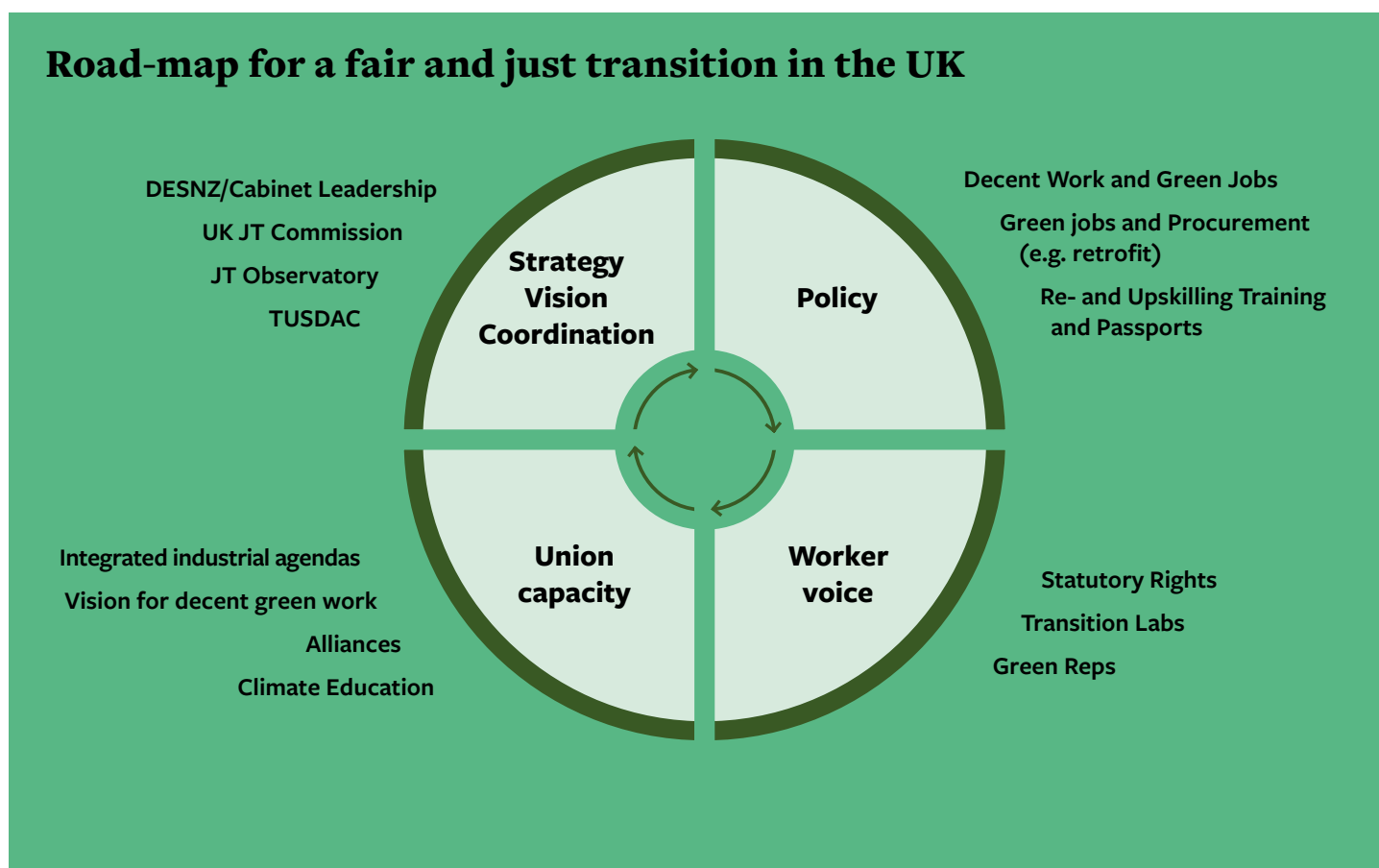
Climate education

Unions need to engage more proactively in future scenario building to imagine futures without reliance on fossil fuels in which workers and citizens are happy. We recommend the TUC/TUSDAC lead a union

‘climate conversation’ to facilitate more constructive dialogue and proposals for a national just transition plan.

As a basis for this we propose a toolkit on climate and just transition for union reps and union officials is needed that engages with worker education on the climate crisis.

Existing resources need to be regularly updated to identify good practice, and up to date cases. Global philanthropy has been funding [training for works councils in Germany](#). In the US, unions have been leading on climate education through the [Climate Jobs National Resource Center](#). There is considerable scope to leverage this learning globally.



This project focuses on studying Just Transitions by comparing concepts, policies, and strategies across 13 diverse countries to ensure a socially just shift towards decarbonisation. It aims to develop recommendations for climate-friendly structural changes that protect workers and vulnerable groups. The project is funded by the Hans Böckler Foundation – Just Transition: Aktivitäten im internationalen Vergleich 2021-582-2.



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Find out more

Visit the website (<https://justtransition.leeds.ac.uk>) for further information about this project, including full case study reports, podcast episodes, and articles.

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