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Unlikely Pioneers? Net Zero Governance in ‘Left-Behind’ Places in the UK and Germany:

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Outline

- Unlikely climate pioneers.
- Role of structure and agency for climate policy.
- Comparative study of the UK and Germany.
- ‘The art of climate pioneering’.

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“*Unlikely climate pioneers: local governments’ net zero actions in left behind places in the UK and Germany*” (2024 – 2027)

The British Academy

Uneven geography of (representation of) local climate leadership

- Cities and local governments as key nodes in multi-level climate governance (e.g. Bulkeley & Kern, 2006).
- Local climate leadership is typically associated with structural advantages – larger/global cities; prosperous locations; university towns (e.g. Acuto, 2013; Hofstad et al, 2022; Kern et al., 2023).
- Structural factors: uneven capacities under neoliberalism (‘left-behind places’).
- Visibility-related factors: disadvantaged places are less ‘extravert’ so that their experience are more likely to be ‘hidden’.

- Epistemic justice – deliberate attention to ‘peripheral innovation’.

Some structural conditions tend to support progressive local climate policy…

Favourable socio-demographic, socio-economic, and political conditions, particularly…

- a growing, young and above-average educated and skilled population
- favourable economic conditions, strong service sectors, high salaries
- strong civil societies, particularly environmental groups
- political influence of green/alternative parties
- a supportive local research environment.

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How do local factors shape transformation pathways towards climate-neutral and resilient cities?

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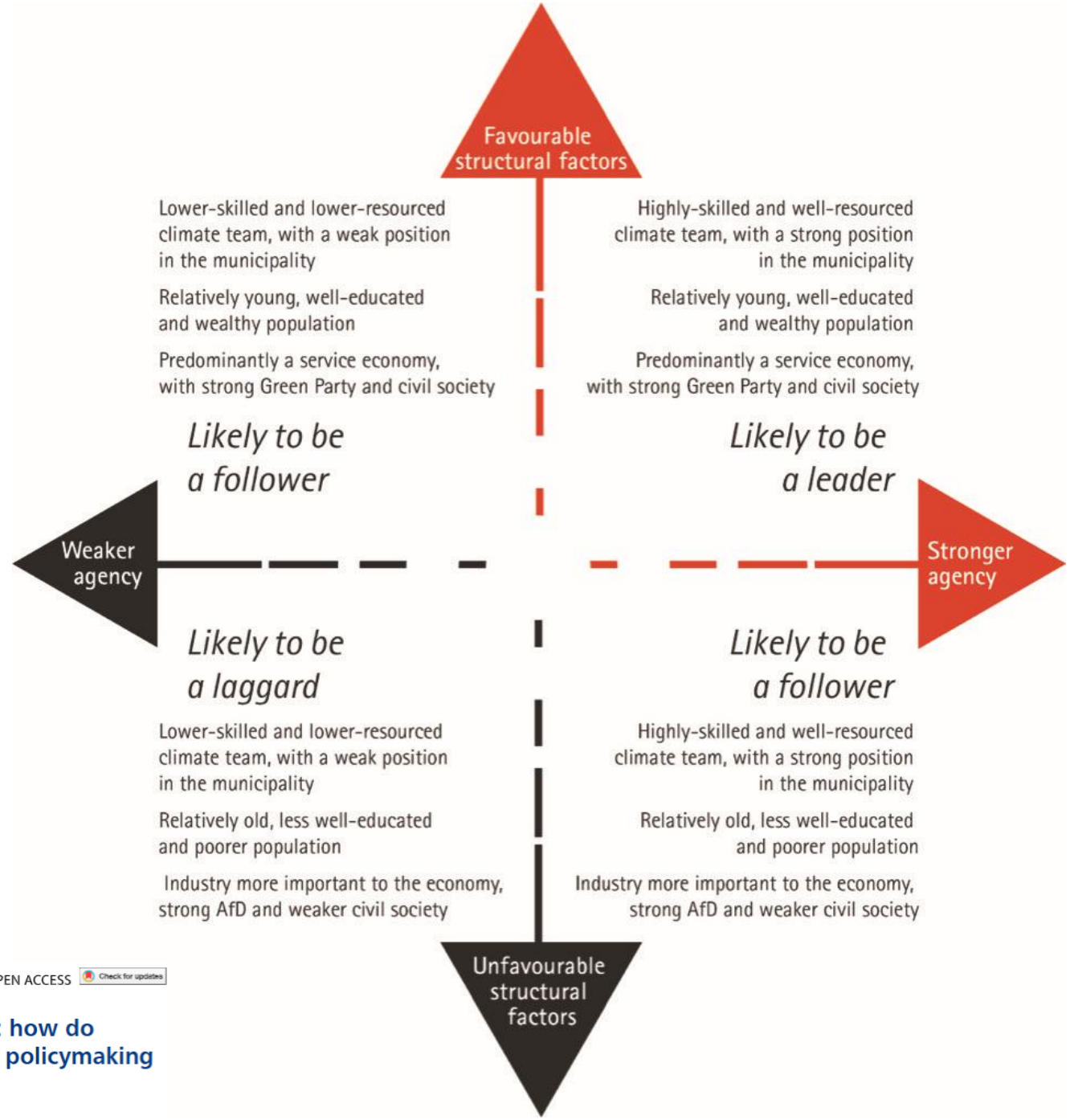
Agency can compensate for structure, so that structure is not deterministic.



POLICY DEBATES

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Structure, agency and local climate governance: how do individual actors exploit local contexts to shape policymaking in smaller cities and towns?

Wolfgang Haupt[a], Leonie Laug[a] and Peter Eckersley[a,b]

How is ‘change agency’ is being formed, performed and sustained?

A comparative analysis: UK vs. Germany

	Lancaster	North Kesteven	Emden	Lüchow-Dannenberg
Total population	145K (2024)	122K (2024)	49K (2025)	47K (2025)
Population change, %	+8.3% (2000-2024)	+32.7% (2000-2024)	-4.95 % (1995-2025)	-10.04 % (1995-2025)
GDHI as % of national average	81% (2024)	91% (2024)	82% (2023)	89% (2023)

Lancaster

https://abritandasoutherner.com/best-things-to-do-in-lancaster-uk/

North Kesteven

https://www.britainexpress.com/counties/lincs/az/sleaford.htm

Emden

https://www.dvz.de/unternehmen/see/detail/news/haf en-emden-stockt-investitionen-kraeftig-auf.html

Lüchow-Dannenberg

https://www.goethe.de/prj/ger/de/wow/umw/26618564.html

England - stronger centralisation and fiscal constraints.

Germany - greater formal autonomy and federal climate-support architectures.

Qualitative research: 20 ‘elite’/expert interviewees + document analysis.

	Climate ambition	Distinctive achievements	Institutional innovation
Lancaster	• Council activities: **net zero by 2030** • A net-zero district energy and built environment by 2040	• Stronger-than-national new-build carbon standards • **UK's first fully decarbonised leisure centre** • On top in Climate Emergency Scorecards 2023, 2025	• Cross-service Climate Hub • Climate embedded across staff roles, planning and energy strategy
North Kesteven	• Council emissions: - 95% by 2030 from 2008/09 • District-wide energy-related CO2 - **95% by 2030 from 2005**	• Fabric-first/net-zero-ready Local Plan standards • **Passivhaus council housing and major retrofits** • Council-owned Lafford Homes extends higher building standards into market-rental housing	• Climate-action matrix across council functions
Lüchow-Dannenberg	• **100% renewable-energy ambition since 1997** • Territorial climate-neutrality by 2040	• **Renewable electricity = 109% of local demand in 2022** • Expansion into rural mobility.	• Permanent climate-management capacity • Climate screening of council decisions • Integrated climate and mobility unit
Emden	• **Territorial climate-neutrality by 2040**	• **Renewable electricity = 117% of city demand in 2023** • European Energy Award: Silver 2004; Gold 2012, 2025 • Masterplan 100% Climate Protection as an overarching municipal strategy	• Permanent climate-management capacity • Cross-departmental climate working • Heat-transition team links climate management, planning, economic development and Stadtwerke Emden

Three dimensions of the **art of climate pioneering**

Collective momentum

How does climate ambition emerge?

- A 'spark': co-alignment of **committed actors** and critical events (historical contingency)
- Need to acquire wider legitimacy and 'buy-in' (e.g. co-production with stakeholders, coalition-building)
- **Addressing local challenges/contexts**

Creative assembly

How is it operationalised?

- Capacity from fragmented resources
- '*Organisational engineering*'
- Experimentation (e.g. economic viability)
- Climate strategy as a framework strategy
- Dedicated climate teams for capturing external resources

Organisational culture

How is it made durable?

- Part of local organisational identity
- **Institutional memory**
- Economic path creation/new vested interests

Lüchow-Dannenberg:
"*We also want to show that there's another way*"
anti-nuclear mobilisation → renewables vision

North Kesteven:
"*The green thread runs through everything we do [and] has become a very strong cultural norm in the organisation*"

Conclusions

- Unlikely pioneers show how climate-governance capacity can be constructed under the conditions experienced by many ‘ordinary’ municipalities.
- Epistemic justice <-> Just transition.
- Difficult to measure or control for factors shaping ‘change agency’ - these factors are highly dynamic and contingent.
- ‘Art’ of pioneering rather than ‘science’ (epistemological flexibility).
- Capacity is partly produced by action: collaboration creates relationships, implementation creates expertise, projects create routines, and success creates credibility.

Thank you!

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