

Next Generation practical learning guide 2: working in partnership with local authorities



Summary of key points:

Local authorities are recognised as having a pivotal role in developing and leading local responses to climate change.¹ There are many examples of community energy groups partnering closely with local authorities, but it can be challenging at times.



Recommendations from [Plymouth Energy Community](#), a group that has established a highly effective partnership with their local council, and a participant in the Next Generation programme, include the following:

- Ensure that you understand your local authority's perspective and the pressures it faces.
- Build a relationship for the long term and in an apolitical way, as the political control of your local authority may change over time.
- Recognise that your local authority is a complex organisation involving many different actors
- Look for allies across the organisation, both amongst the foot soldiers and in the political ranks.
- Develop an outline 'heads of agreement'¹ or collaboration plan with your local authority.
- Then put forward credible plans and proposals for specific initiatives.

¹ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/local-authorities-and-the-sixth-carbon-budget/>

Learning from the Next Generation programme:

Local authorities play many roles in communities and are potentially important allies for community energy groups. But they may not always appreciate the benefits that working with community energy groups can bring. In practice, there are potential benefits from collaboration on both sides, as shown in the table below.

What's in it for the community energy group?	What's in it for the local authority?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to assets including buildings and land owned by the council. - Support on planning issues. - Coordination with other activities (including Climate Emergency/Net Zero initiatives). - Potential access to funding. - Credibility in the eyes of local stakeholders and/or funders. - Framework contracts for supply of energy goods and services at scale. - Access to expert support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community-led projects can help the local authority to implement its Climate Emergency strategy or plan. - Added social value compared to commercial suppliers (e.g. through fuel poverty activities and community benefit funds). - A route to engagement with the local community. - Access to knowledgeable, often expert, and committed pro-climate individuals within the community. - Indirect access to specific funds and community share raises.

However, it is important to remember that local authorities are large, complex organisations with many different roles and functions, comprised of many different individuals and groupings, ranging from the party affiliations of elected members to the departmental affiliations of council officers. Therefore you should remember to tailor your approach to best fit the needs and priorities of the individuals you approach.

There are a number of important ways in which your community energy group can interact with your local authority. The list below is not exhaustive but provides a starting point.

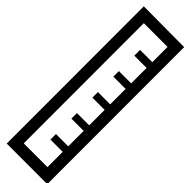
Via Climate Emergency plans: Find out [here](#) whether your local authority has declared a 'Climate Emergency' – this would show that they have senior-level commitment to tackle climate change. Some councils have already developed Climate Action or Net Zero Plans but others are still working out how to do this. Your community energy group can help to play a role in the development of Net Zero plans, or help deliver local energy projects or help the local authority to engage with the wider community on energy and climate issues.



Starting in 2016, Bristol City Council supported community energy initiatives by funding 39 projects through the [Bristol Community Energy Fund](#), issuing both grants and loans to local groups. This built on earlier partnership working with the community-led Bristol Energy Network. While the Council is now leading a number of major initiatives itself (e.g. district heat networks), it continues to see community energy as vital to tackling the Climate Emergency.

Access to buildings and other assets:

In contrast to most community energy groups, local authorities are major owners of assets, including council buildings, car parks, school buildings, council housing, parks and other council-owned land. Such assets are often central to enabling community energy initiatives. For example, [Chester Community Energy](#), one of the Next Generation groups, has worked with their local authority to put solar PV installations on municipal car parks. Chester Community Energy were able to raise funds for this initiative through a community share offer, a mechanism which enabled them to take forward a development that their council was not in a position to finance.

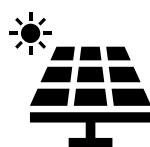


[CREW Energy](#) is working to install heat pumps in London. In some London boroughs, they have identified planning policy as a barrier to the installation of air source heat pumps in smaller houses, because of a requirement that heat pumps need to be sited at least one meter from a neighbouring property.

Planning and CILS policy: To anticipate and tackle planning issues relating to energy efficiency and low carbon energy get to know the planning department within your local authority. Take up opportunities to comment on the Local Plan to ensure that policies are supportive of sustainable energy (e.g. heat pumps, solid wall insulation, heat networks and so on). For example, check the criteria that your local authority uses for the allocation of funding raised from developers via the 'Community Infrastructure Levy' (CILS) – there may be scope for this to support community-led projects, now or in the future. Changes to planning policy are a slow, but powerful way of changing the system.

Procurement frameworks for energy

goods and services: the Social Value Act (2012) allows local authorities to incorporate social value into their procurement criteria. This can favour community and voluntary sector groups that have social rather than profit objectives. Talk to your local authority about the criteria they use and encourage them to consider wider use of social value clauses. Some councils are considering purchase of renewable electricity or carbon credits from community energy groups through 'synthetic' or 'sleeved' Power Purchase Agreements. See Devon County Council's [report](#), prepared by CAG Consultants, for further information about the potential for synthetic PPAs.



[Brighton Energy Co-op](#) and [BHESCo](#) have installed solar PV on schools under a framework agreement with Brighton City Council. Brighton Energy Co-op has worked slowly and steadily to nurture their relationship with elected members and officers over many years – while it can be slow to get this relationship moving, it's worth it because of the potential to be involved in large scale, far-reaching projects with the council.

Collaboration on electric vehicle (EV) chargepoints: many local authorities are already involved, or considering getting involved, in supporting the roll-out of EV charge point infrastructure. There is scope for collaboration on such developments with community energy groups, particularly in rural areas which have insufficient demand to tempt commercial operators but might offer scope for a community-led EV car club. Further detail about [Nadder Community Energy's](#) work on community car clubs, within the Next Generation programme, can be found [here](#).



How do you build your relationship with your local authority?

If your community energy group is looking to develop and build its relationship with your local authority, some suggested starting points are:

- **Find allies within the organisation** – find out whether there is a ‘Climate Emergency’, ‘Sustainability’ or ‘Low Carbon’ officer and reach out to them. They are likely to be a good starting point.
- **Look for senior level support:** you also need to develop support amongst higher level officers and elected members who have more say in council decisions. You could start by inviting key individuals to speak at one of your events or attend the opening of one of your projects.
- **Build the relationship over time:** there are risks to allying your group too closely to one political party. A broader approach may make your relationship more resilient to future change in the majority party within the council.
- **Consider setting up a co-operation agreement or collaboration plan:** this does not need to include project plans or details but can be a useful way of establishing a collaborative relationship that can survive changes in personnel or political leadership.
- **Put forward credible plans and proposals for specific initiatives:** looking professional is important. So make sure that your ideas are well thought-through before formally submitting them to your local authority. If you have a trustee who has experience of bid or proposal writing, this may be helpful.



Co-operation agreement: [Bath & West Community Energy](#) developed a simple agreement with their local authority, stating the intention for the two organisations to work collaboratively together, highlighting the benefits of doing this and describing some of the ways in which the relationship would work. [Plymouth Energy Community](#) have a similar ‘collaboration plan’ agreement with Plymouth City Council.

To find out more:

- See the **Next Generation Practical Learning Guide 1** about general partnership working by community energy groups and **Practical Learning Guide 3** about partnership with private firms.
- Visit <https://www.next-generation.org.uk/innovation> or contact Will Walker at Power to Change to find out more about the Next Generation programme.
- See ['Transforming Energy: the Power of Local Toolkit'](#), developed by Bristol Energy Network and Bristol City Council, with Community Energy England.
- See [Ashden's co-benefits toolkit](#) which helps local authorities to make the business case for climate action.
- See a recent report ['Cities and Community Energy in England'](#) by Community Energy London, funded by the MCS Charitable Foundation, examining the current and potential role for community energy within Climate Emergency plans at city level.
- See further guidance for community energy groups on working with local authorities on Climate Emergency issues - on Community Energy England's 'how to page' [here](#).