

Best practice guide

A guide on engaging local communities in the development of Local Area Energy Plans (LAEPs)

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**citizens
advice**



Executive summary

The local delivery of net zero will form a key part of the net zero transition. Local Area Energy Plans (LAEPs) are an important piece of the puzzle and should reflect the needs and interests of local people. That's why we want to see a greater emphasis placed on community engagement within the LAEP process.

Our [recent research](#) used deliberative methods to better understand what people wanted from community engagement. People felt strongly that the views of local communities should be taken into consideration, largely because of the impact that any decisions related to LAEPs could have on their lives.

This guide is designed as a toolkit for local authorities and other stakeholders to use when thinking about engaging local communities in the development of Local Area Energy Plans. We've relied on insights from the people we spoke to to give a sense of what engagement should look and feel like.

Aims of this guide

1

To help local authorities and other stakeholders interested in developing Local Area Energy Plans better understand how to involve local communities in them

2

To share our learnings from the process of deliberative* research to support local authorities and other stakeholders in using a similar approach

3

To raise awareness about the importance of community engagement through highlighting the voices and experiences of the people we spoke to

*A deliberative research approach means participants are encouraged to learn about a topic so that they can come to an informed view. It usually includes a 'deliberation' session where participants discuss and share ideas, and encourages involvement in decision making.

What are Local Area Energy Plans?

LAEPs allow for a place-based approach to net zero based on the particularities of a specific area. They help create a roadmap for the local energy system, taking into account energy supply, demand, and infrastructure.

These plans span various energy sectors, including electricity, heating and cooling, transportation, and industry. They serve as a framework to guide decision making, attract investment, and foster collaboration among various stakeholders to achieve a sustainable and resilient local energy system.

Energy Systems Catapult (ESC) have led the way working with local authorities on LAEPs. However, LAEPs can be developed by a variety of stakeholders and are not a brand owned by a particular body. [Our previous research](#) outlined all the different kinds of plans that could be thought of as LAEPs.

"The council's role is to serve our best interests and **you would think they would want to find out what our best interests are.**" (Pembrokeshire participant)

£825bn

of wider social benefits would be unleashed by a place-based approach to Net Zero

Part of the challenge with LAEPs is that there's no nationally agreed definition. There needs to be more clarity around what they are and how they might work including any associated powers.

We support the introduction of Regional Systems Planners (RSPs) which we see as providing a key technical, data driven and independent role in this process. Their plans should reflect the needs and interests of local people and local authorities. The RSP should provide support to local authorities based on wider regional contexts. Crucially, their unique role will consider both electricity and gas needs and optimise plans on a whole-system basis ensuring the lowest costs for consumers.

Public engagement does feature in LAEP guidance as a part of wider stakeholder engagement, but there is no specific guidance on how best to engage with the public or the importance of doing so.

Reaching net zero will require significant changes to the way we heat and power our homes and buildings. But it's not always clear to people what changes they should be making and when. There's also a lack of tailored advice to support people. People need access to a national communications plan to give them the advice and support they need to make the right decisions. LAEPs are an important piece of the puzzle because they help give clarity and direction to people about what kinds of changes they can expect and what they might need to do.



How to engage the public in LAEPs

The 'ideal' consultation people told us they wanted to see

1 Share information

First step should be widely sharing information about potential LAEPs. Information should include what kind of changes are being considered in a local area, and why.

2 Wide reaching survey

A survey open to everyone shared as widely as possible. Encouraging people to take part in the process is important. Prizes or incentives could be useful here.

5 Agree actions

The agreed outcome from the whole process of community engagement should be shared.

4 Deliberative engagement

A smaller group of people should be selected to take part in an in-person deliberative engagement session. This will give people time to develop an understanding of the issues and learn from others.

3 Community outreach

LAEP developers should proactively reach out to people through community groups, libraries, supermarkets, GPs etc. This is to increase overall engagement and attract underrepresented groups.

6 Feedback loop

People should be able to feedback into plans as and when new decisions need to be made or changes happen.

Delivery phase

Once the plan has been agreed on by all relevant stakeholders, the delivery phase can begin. People told us they still wanted to be updated during this phase. They wanted to know whether things were going according to plan, and if not, why not. If plans have had to change, they wanted to be informed.

Citizens Charter




We asked people to come up with a key set of principles that developers of LAEPs could use when engaging with the public. They collectively decided on the following 8 principles. These are principles that you should have in mind when thinking about engaging with your local community.

1

Involve

The public should be involved in the development of LAEPs in a meaningful way

Why?

-  People have a right to be involved because decisions made will have an impact on their lives
-  Involving the public will lead to better decisions being made
-  LAEPs are more likely to be achievable and deliverable if people are brought along on the journey and properly consulted

In practice this means proactively seeking out the views of the public where feasible, taking into consideration and acting upon those views.




“Buy-in is better than imposition: this is a **two-way conversation.**” (Waltham Forest participant)

2

Collaborate

Collaboration between the public and developers of LAEPs should happen throughout the entire development process

Why?

-  A collaborative approach recognises the expertise of developers, but also makes use of a community's knowledge, helping to ensure goodwill from residents
-  Residents have valuable local knowledge that can increase the chance of a plan's success, especially where there is a need for people to change their behaviour
-  The plan is likely to change between the initial ideas stage and the final publication. It's important that residents have the opportunity to influence the plans and can give feedback on proposed changes throughout this process

In practice this means an ongoing dialogue with clear feedback from developers about how residents' views are being implemented. This would reassure the public that the process was truly a two-way conversation.

3

Opportunity

Everyone who wants to should have the opportunity to participate in a public engagement in some way

Why?



Having a diversity of views and opinions is key



It's important that the process is inclusive so that people who might not usually take part are heard from

In practice this means a multi-method and multi-stage approach which can reach a wider range of people in a way that suits them. The most popular approach was reaching out to a large number of local residents but also working with a smaller group in more depth e.g. surveys and deliberative workshops. Both online and offline options should be used where possible so that people can choose according to their preference.

"Everyone's voice is important. The council should serve the people and the plan should be a two-way conversation."
(Pembrokeshire participant)

4

Representation

Residents should be purposely selected to be representative of their community

Why?



Views of a whole community should be represented



It's important that people from all walks of life can take part, not just the same group of engaged citizens with the time and money to attend

In practice this means including groups who might be traditionally excluded from public engagement. To support this, opportunities to participate should be publicised in relevant community spaces such as religious buildings, groups for older people and supermarkets. Incentives are also needed because they enable and encourage people who might not usually take part in something like this to do so.

5

Support

There should be proactive support available to make sure everyone invited to take part feels confident and able to do so

Why?

- ✚ No one should be held back from participating due to access barriers
- ✚ People who are usually excluded are likely to have important perspectives based on lived experience
- ✚ It's the responsibility of those delivering and designing engagement to proactively include and support people to take part
- ✚ Some marginalised communities might be even more impacted by changes so they should have more of a say

In practice it's about offering events at a range of different times and providing online and offline options. Where events happen in person, venues should be accessible and comfortable. Having skilled facilitators is also important because they help make sure everyone gets a chance to speak.

"It's really important that **collaboration happens end to end, and even after.**" (Waltham Forest participant)

6

Information

Information should be timely, clear, engaging and easily accessible to the public

Why?

- i Information can help the public learn about an issue so that they can come to an informed view or understanding
- i It's better for the public to have an understanding of the facts before they share their thoughts



In practice this means explaining technical terms and giving people the opportunity to ask questions. It means giving people time to embed learning at a time that suits them. Any information should be provided in alternative formats, such as large print and other languages. Explaining what the options are and how changes will impact them were seen as the most important bits of information. As well as full transparency around cost.

Transparency

7

The process should be transparent, with LAEP developers being required to formally respond to findings and recommendations from the engagement

Why?

-  For there to be trust between the public and developers of LAEPs, there needs to be full transparency
-  LAEP developers should demonstrate how they're planning on incorporating people's views into the plans

In practice a requirement for developers to formally respond to every phase of a public engagement is paramount. Developers should be clear about how the process has been influenced by the input of residents. Where residents' preferences and ideas cannot be incorporated, developers should explain why.

"On principle, information should be available. The council is just an arm of the community, they're supposed to be a servant of the community. Transparency is better, that the information is available." (Pembrokeshire participant)



8

Accountability

The public should be able to hold decision makers accountable by continuing to feed into plans once they have been agreed.

There should be opportunities for residents to comment on the success of actions undertaken and hold developers to account if plans have not been delivered.

Why?

-  People want to be assured that developers of LAEPs will do what they have said they will do
-  People accept that plans may need to change and adapt to new opportunities but people want to be told why these changes are happening and how it differs from the original plan

In practice this means an ongoing process of public engagement to be continued beyond the planning phase. Progress should be reported on and shared for the community to see - if something's not gone according to plan it should be explained why, and what the impacts and costs were.

Citizens Charter



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Top Tips for community engagement

These are our top tips for getting the most out of community engagement based on the reflections and preferences of participants who took part in the research.

1

Use deliberative research methods to give people the chance to become really invested in a topic. People told us that they really enjoyed the research process and felt the methodology worked well to enable and empower them to express their views.

2

Bring together a diverse group of people to take part in the engagement. People enjoyed the opportunity to hear from members of their community who they might not normally speak to and therefore understand and consider different perspectives.

3

Give people the opportunity to shape a set of recommendations at the end of the process. People valued this as it made them feel as though they had been listened to.

4

Use incentive payments because they attract a broader range of people and allow people to organise childcare and take time off work. Most people we spoke to took part because of the incentive payment, but found that they quickly became passionate about the issue, to the point of doing their own research.

“If you came to me now and said you’d have to commit for two years, **I’d do it because I want my kids to breathe clean air** but if you asked me a year ago, I wouldn’t have done it.” (Waltham Forest participant)



Top Tips for community engagement

5

Present information in a clear, easy to understand way and in plain English. Give people time to digest information at home and the ability to engage with background information about LAEPs. Make space for people to hear from experts on the topic, as well as ask them questions. For many people we spoke to, this gave them added confidence to express their opinions on a complex issue.

Something we didn't have but people told us they would have liked to have was a glossary of terms to refer to throughout the engagement process. They also wanted more information specific to their local area.

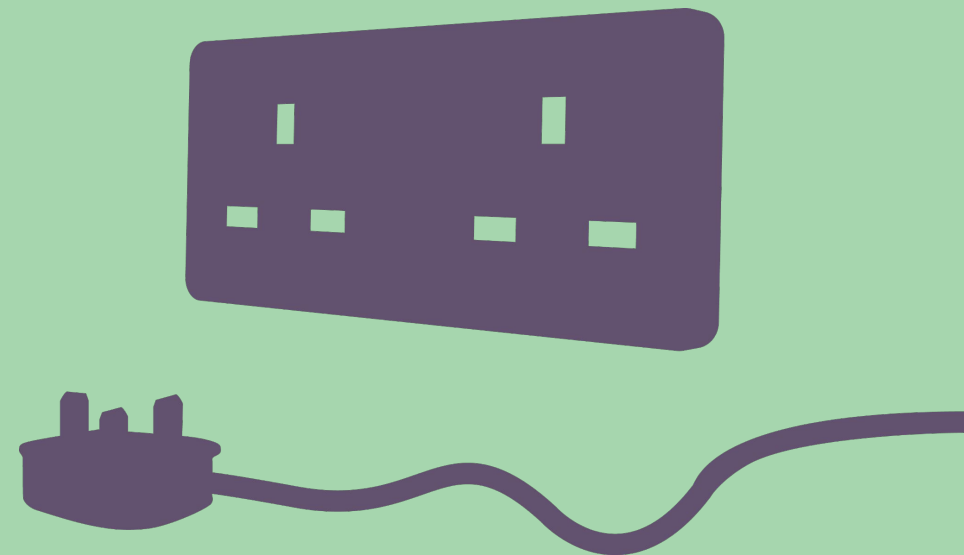
6

Allow engagement to happen in different ways to suit different people. A blend of online and offline engagement should be able to meet everyone's needs. In terms of people's preferences, there was a mix between those who preferred online engagement and those who preferred meeting in person.

If possible, work multiple stages into the process, so that people can build knowledge and confidence over time. This can also create a sense of achievement for those who completed the process. People told us that having multiple stages stopped them feeling overwhelmed with the amount of information.

7

Create space for participants to build rapport with each other before and during engagement. This helps people feel comfortable and encourages honesty. Smaller breakout groups also help build rapport, as does having an online introduction meeting with everyone at the start. In person events in particular allow participants to meet and spend time with people from their community, encouraging strong working relationships and collaboration.



References and bibliography

1. Citizens Advice, [Look before you LAEP](#): Ending the postcode lottery of local area energy plans, May 2021
2. UKRI Innovate UK, [Accelerating Net Zero Delivery](#): Unlocking the benefits of climate action in UK city-regions, March 2022

Annex - What we did

We commissioned Thinks Insight & Strategy to find out people's views on public involvement in the development of Local Area Energy Plans (LAEPs).

The research took place from February to April 2023. It involved 50 participants from 3 locations - Bury, Pembrokeshire and Waltham Forest. People were recruited to be representative of their local area, with a particular focus on including underrepresented groups.

We used a mix of online and offline sessions to help embed learning and prepare people for the in-person workshops. People were also given opportunities to ask questions to experts in the live dial-in sessions.

We chose a deliberative research method in order to create a space for people to learn about LAEPs and allow people to build an informed view on community engagement.

We also wanted to understand what people valued about deliberative research and whether it should form part of wider community engagement.

At the end of the process, we asked people to come up with a set of key principles to guide community engagement. These formed the Citizens Charter.



Phase 1: Learn

Welcome plenary



Online learning platform

Live dial in sessions

Phase 2: Deliberate



In person workshops

Evaluation form

Phase 3: Reflect and recommend



Reflection groups

Citizens Committee

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