

# Close to home

How to engage local communities in the development of Local Area Energy Plans (LAEPs)

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**citizens  
advice**



# Executive summary

Reaching Net Zero by 2050 will require location-specific and cost effective solutions that make sure no one is left behind. These include setting up Local Area Energy Plans (LAEPs) to map out the transition at a local level.

But as we found in our [previous research](#), LAEPs vary hugely from place to place due to challenges around funding, powers and support for local authorities. This has led to a postcode lottery, with some areas at risk of missing out on the benefits that net zero can bring.

And that's not the only issue - there's also a lack of guidance and awareness around how best to involve local communities in the development of LAEPs. Our [previous research](#) found that some local authorities struggled to meaningfully engage with local people.

Our new research shows that people strongly believe local communities should have a say because of the impact it could have on their lives. It's clear that the engagement and buy-in of local people will be essential to the success of any LAEP - and therefore the success of meeting our national net zero targets.

The cost of not engaging local communities is high - failing to consult people properly could result in feelings of disillusionment or hostility to the broader net zero agenda.

We wanted to find out from people themselves what meaningful community engagement meant to them. Together with members of the public we put together a Citizens Charter which outlines a set of principles of engagement for local authorities to follow when developing LAEPs.

## Key findings

- 1 There should be **ongoing engagement** throughout the LAEP process
- 2 **People from all walks of life**, especially those who wouldn't usually take part in something like this, should be given the opportunity to get involved
- 3 **Poor engagement** risks turning people away from net zero



# 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.



# Community engagement

Community engagement is a vital part of any public consultation because it taps into the knowledge and perspectives of local community members, meaning that their unique needs and priorities are taken into account. It means that local solutions to local problems can be developed in partnership with the community. It fosters a sense of ownership and support amongst the community, building trust and confidence in the decisions being made.

In an energy context, it helps to empower individuals to make sustainable choices and participate in energy-related initiatives because they're more aware of their options. Moreover, community engagement enhances transparency, accountability and ongoing dialogue, leading to a more effective and successful energy transition at the local level.

But doing this properly takes time, expertise and money - all of which local authorities need more of. It's up to national government to provide the necessary conditions to allow local authorities to deliver meaningful community engagement. Nowhere is this more important than the transition to net zero - which needs ongoing community buy-in and support to succeed.

"It was interesting because I think for me this is something I probably wouldn't have even thought about and **I didn't envision I would find it as interesting as I have.** it's great to hear from different people and places. It's important that the community has a say in what happens in the community." (Waltham Forest participant)

## Benefits

-  Better decision making
-  Raises awareness and understanding
-  Reduces risk of pushback
-  Secures buy-in and support

## Challenges

-  Lack of resources
-  Lack of time
-  Lack of expertise

# 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 live dial-in sessions.

We chose a deliberative research method in order to create space for people to learn about LAEPs and allow them 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

# Key findings

1

## There should be ongoing engagement throughout the process

There was an overwhelming sense from the people we spoke to that the public should have a say in Local Area Energy Planning. They wanted this engagement to be ongoing throughout the process, and start early on.

People told us they were worried about this becoming another tick box exercise where the public is asked about an issue but actually all the decisions had already been made.

Asking people for their views early on and throughout helps build trust, making them feel as though their ideas will be taken into account.

2

## People from all walks of life should be given the opportunity to get involved

Making sure people from all walks of life, especially those from underrepresented groups, are involved was really important to the people we spoke to.

They were concerned about the same voices being heard in public consultations. They wanted to see greater care taken to reach out to the whole community.

That includes people who may not usually take part in public engagement, people who are time poor and people with accessibility needs.

3

## Poor engagement risks turning people away from net zero

People were worried that the public might turn against net zero initiatives on a local level if they're not engaged properly.

People shared examples of changes in their local area that had happened without their knowledge and without their views being sought. People spoke of distrust and disillusionment in these cases.

They made it clear that more than the decision itself, it's about feeling like you've at least been informed and given the opportunity to make your views heard.

Overall, people were supportive of net zero and wanted to see it being delivered locally. They wanted LAEPs to succeed and saw community engagement as essential to that success.



# Citizens Charter



## Involve

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



## Collaborate

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



## Opportunity

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



## Representation

Residents should be purposely selected to be representative of their community



## Support

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



## Information

Information should be timely, clear, engaging and easily accessible



## Transparency

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



## Accountability

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



# 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.

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 should 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 and 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 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 this 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 to good decision making



It's important that the process is inclusive to encourage involvement from people that might not usually take part

**In practice** this means a multi-method and multi-stage approach which can reach a wide 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.

## Support

There should be proactive support available to make sure everyone invited to take part feels able and confident 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 programmes of engagement to proactively include and support people to take part
- ✚ Some marginalised communities might be disproportionately impacted by changes so they should have even more of a say

**In practice** this means offering events at a range of different times and providing both 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)

## Information

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

### Why?

- 📄 Information can help the public learn about an issue so that they can come to an informed view or understanding
- 📄 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, as well as allowing them the time needed to embed learning. Any information should be provided in a range of 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. Full transparency around cost, was also seen as a priority.

## Transparency

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**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 resident's input. 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 they want to be told why changes are happening and how they differ 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 then local authorities should explain why, what the impact and what the cost was.

# Making it happen

Local Area Energy Plans are an essential piece of the net zero puzzle, but the way they're currently being rolled out is not meeting the scale of the challenge. Lack of consistency and clarity about what LAEPs are and how they should work, as well as a lack of funding, is holding back progress.

Government should be accelerating the local delivery of net zero because it's right that local communities drive changes in their area and see the benefits that the net zero transition can bring. That means giving local authorities the support, funding and powers they need to deliver net zero.

People told us net zero should be delivered locally because they see local government as an extension of their own communities and want to have the opportunity to influence and shape decisions. Community engagement is about bringing people along on the journey. This helps raise awareness, secure buy-in and encourage better decision making.

Only with the buy-in and support of local communities can we deliver net zero.

## Policy recommendations

Our research shows that people want to be part of the net zero journey. The following support should be in place to capitalise on LAEPs:

1

### National framework

A national framework is needed that supports local government and other stakeholders to tailor plans based on local needs and ambitions. This will give much needed clarity and direction around the need for LAEPs, and should be free and easily accessible. Community engagement should be a key part of that framework, including the Citizens Charter.

2

### Funding

National government should reassess how LAEPs are currently funded with a view to move away from the current short term competitive bid process. This has stifled longer term planning and has led to a postcode lottery where some areas are falling behind. A fairer and more sustainable funding model is needed.

3

### Delivery

Government should consider what mechanism will best deliver net zero at a local level. It should be clearer in its ambition for all local authorities to develop LAEPs. It should implement Regional System Planners and ensure that their role and relationship with LAEPs and local authorities is clearly defined

# 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

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