

Establishing the right partnerships

When you're starting up an energy efficiency project, taking time to establish the right partnerships can ensure that you set the foundations for a project that will deliver and extend further than one set up in isolation. You will be in a better position to tap into external resources and to relevant work already being carried out in your area.

This guidance provides an overview of the different types of partnerships you could look at establishing, broadly how you would set them up, the benefits associated with partnership models, and risks you should be aware of. It concentrates on cross-sector partnerships between community groups and Local Authorities, social landlords, energy suppliers and local traders.

Partnerships can range in scope but might include elements of sharing knowledge, developing complementary ways of working, formal agreements for project delivery, endorsement of one or both parties by the other, or an award of funding. For the purpose of this guidance note, the term partnership is not used in its legal sense (as defined by the Partnership Act 1890) but instead is used in the context of joint working towards a common goal.

Of course, all partnerships require a sense of trust and mutual benefit so there is usually a need for each party to adjust their objectives and approach to reflect the interests and opinions of the other. This sort of compromise can sometimes feel to a community group like you are giving up on something you or some of your members hold dear. But it may also mean you can deliver a project at a scale and impact which would be unachievable without the partner's involvement and support.

If you are looking to establish a more formal partnership, see the PlanLoCaL resource: 'Contracts, agreements and tendering'.

Partnering with a Local Authority

Your Local Authority will often share some of your group's objectives, and will have resources and capacity which might bring benefits to a partnership with a community group. These could include:

- Influence over planning and permitting new developments
- Access to different funding streams
- Management of council housing stock (see 'Partnering with social housing providers' below)
- In-house energy projects and expertise
- Other specialist knowledge, expertise and resources (e.g. marketing)

They may be able to help you by providing support for your activities or a better understanding of the mechanics of local Government, and you may be able to help them by offering a community angle on proposals and schemes, or helping them to reach out to householders and community organisations.

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Some Local Authorities, especially larger ones, will be involved in Green Deal programmes and you may be able to influence them in developing a role for community groups (for example to support promotional and advice activities and pay referral fees), or to enable links between their programmes and your own plans for energy efficiency projects.

Local Authorities are large organisations, and identifying the right contact(s) can be difficult. A good exercise to carry out before engaging your Local Authority is to set out your group's existing and potential activities, how the Local Authority might support them, and where there is crossover with existing Local Authority work or targets. It is important to know what work the Local Authority is already undertaking and supporting (a google search on "[Your town] energy efficiency" might be a good place to start).

You should also be able to look up the names of the council's Sustainability Officer (if there is one – check the council's website), the officer responsible for Home Energy Conservation Act reporting, and/or your local councillor. Different councils organise their departments differently, but there may be people working in departments named 'Housing', 'Neighbourhood Services', 'Economic Development' or 'Property Services' with an interest in your proposals. Having the support of a local councillor can help to ensure that officers respond promptly to your approach.

Once you have identified relevant contact(s), the next step is a conversation or a meeting to put your energy efficiency project on their radar and establish whether or not there is potential for joint working. This could be followed up by inviting the council representative to your community group meeting, at which point you can set out your specific project aims and ideas and highlight potential synergies with Local Authority activity. Where possible, this meeting could be used to establish project activities, milestones and roles, but that may come further down the line if offers of support or joint working need to be discussed and approved first. In any case, if you have established this level of contact you will probably have a good link person within the council to keep updated on your activities (and vice versa).

Partnering with social housing providers

Social housing providers can be Local Authorities, housing associations (also known as Registered Social Landlords, or Private Registered Providers of Social Housing) or housing cooperatives. They typically operate on a not-for-profit basis with the purpose of providing low-cost housing, with any profits they secure used to renovate or increase their stock portfolio. Social housing forms 15-20% of housing composition on average, but there are often concentrations of social housing – due to a combination of historical stock, differing house prices and costs of running homes in different areas, and local demands for social housing provision.

Many Housing Associations have tenant committees that help inform the way that the housing association is run and these groups will be worth consulting with on any plans that you have. There may also be employed members of staff whose remit includes energy efficiency – they are also worth making contact with. Local Authority housing stock is run by council officers with strategic decisions made by elected councillors. Housing cooperatives are groups of people who live in and collectively manage their accommodation as a self-organised group.

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The majority of social housing providers recognise that insulating their stock will help reduce their tenants' bills and protect them from future energy price rises. The Green Deal provides an opportunity for social housing providers to access finance to make improvements to their properties. A survey of some of the largest 17 housing associations prior to the launch of the Green Deal in August 2012 showed that many were as yet undecided about their role in the Green Deal. The survey responses indicated that if they were to roll out a Green Deal scheme they would want a coordinated approach and would want to be confident about the quality of work and financial benefits to tenants.

Partnerships with social housing providers could present an opportunity for groups working on local energy efficiency projects. Social housing providers often have large housing stock portfolios that can allow for large-scale improvements in energy efficiency and carbon emission reductions. Possible roles for community groups working with social landlords include:

- Educating and engaging tenants on issues around energy use, energy saving, and, where relevant, the Green Deal
- Publicising events or activities of the housing association, or developing guidance and information resources for tenants
- Acting as 'Energy Champions' to engage residents in energy efficiency
- Identifying opportunities for behaviour change or physical improvements and suggesting ways of realising these
- Linking the housing association with local trades people who are already engaged and have been 'vetted' by the community group
- If the group has the capacity and know-how (or is Green Deal accredited) there could be a role providing a service to the housing association (e.g. home energy assessments)

The following simple steps will help you in partnering with a social landlord:

Step 1: Identify activities your group could work on with social housing providers, or may be able to assist social landlords with, and find out which social landlords are active in your area. www.housingnet.co.uk hosts a directory of housing organisations.

Step 2: Engage with identified social housing providers to discuss their needs and highlight where your group could support them. Whilst there is nothing to stop your group partnering with multiple landlords, it could be best to pick one to work with first – preferably one which is active in your area and broadly understands the benefits of sustainable energy for their residents.

Step 3: Gain agreement for joint work on a specific project and set out what each organisations role is. It is important to be clear what activities will be run and how any costs will be covered. Social housing providers may be able to provide some financial support, but their resources, like yours, will be limited. They are more likely to fund direct costs such as venue hire or training for their residents than paying for volunteer time.

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Partnering with energy companies and Green Deal Providers

Energy suppliers have targets to reduce fuel poverty and support energy efficiency improvements in harder-to-treat properties under the Energy Company Obligation (ECO). They may be interested in how your community group can help them reach households which have the appropriate characteristics and may be willing to consider funding or referral fees to support your work. There is more on this in the PlanLoCaL resource: 'Options for funding your community energy project'.

Energy suppliers and distribution network operators (which own and run the local electricity and gas networks) also tend to recognise that it's in their business interests to form better relationships with their customers and the wider community. They may have charitable or business sponsorship funds to which you could apply.

Energy service and insulation installation companies, such as large construction companies and contracting firms, may be registered as Green Deal Providers (or in the process of gaining accreditation) or may be key players in the supply chain, providing the measures for homes. These and other Green Deal Providers could be keen to form partnerships where they see this as increasing their sales, whether directly (e.g. sign-posting residents to their schemes) or indirectly via improved public relations. The same would apply to Green Deal Advice Organisations.

These organisations are often large and some may not be set up to deal with small community groups. To attract their attention, you will need to focus on demonstrating that you understand the characteristics of your area (both households and the energy saving opportunities in their properties) and that you have good networks of local contacts and/or clear methods for engaging local households and raising the profile of energy saving activities.

It could be worth considering partnering with other local community groups, your Local Authority and/or other umbrella bodies in the community sector to engage with these large companies. That way, you are approaching as a larger entity rather than as a single community group, which can help mitigate the risks associated with partnering with a large, private-sector organisation.

Partnering with local traders

Working with local energy efficiency and heating traders and Green Deal Assessors can potentially provide benefits to both parties, with a community group generating interest and customers and the local company delivering the measures which achieve the desired carbon saving and/or fuel poverty impact. The PlanLoCaL resource: 'Working with local installers' gives more guidance on how you might go about this.