

# The local plan, and engaging with your local council

Your local planning authority or council is a useful ally when developing an energy-related plan or project. As well as controlling development in your area, they can be an excellent source of skills and information to help you identify sustainable energy opportunities and develop your initiative.

This guidance helps you find useful sources of information within your local council and understand planning procedure – including what the local plan is and how you may want to get involved. It is important to have effective communication with your local council and gain an understanding of your local plan, as your community plans will need to fit within its higher strategic policies.



## How to contact and engage with your local council

There are several ways to make initial contact with your council: through their website or email address, phoning their general enquiries number, or attending a drop-in centre or event in person. Try to remember the following four principles when engaging with them:

- 1 **Be prepared.** Before speaking with the local authority, have a clear idea of your current situation, what you hope to achieve, and what information and resources you need from them. Keep a note of who you speak to, which team they sit in and what information you receive. This will allow you to easily identify any outstanding information or decisions you need from them and where to go next.
- 2 **Be positive.** This may seem like common sense, but keeping a positive attitude and tone when communicating with your council is far more likely to lead to a quick and full response than if your request sounds negative or demanding.
- 3 **Be persistent.** You will need patience and networking skills to find the team or person with the right information. Communication and administrative procedures can take a long time, but if you find communication is failing with one particular officer or councillor then you should try other contacts within the council. There is often more than one route to the support you need.

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- 4 **Be inclusive.** There is no harm in engaging multiple officers on the same project or issue, though where possible let each team or officer know who else is involved within the council. Once you have engaged someone within your council, keep them updated and involved in your work. Your community may need their support again, and perhaps they can learn from your excellent work!

If you struggle to engage with your council via officers, try speaking to your locally elected councillor. Even if your local council officers are providing you with the support you need, councillors may also be able to politically support the actions of officers, who typically cannot engage with the political process. Your local authority will be able to tell you about the councillor(s) who represent your local area (ward) and often provide a contact number, email address or details of their next drop-in session. Depending on the scale of your request you may also wish to speak to your local Member of Parliament (MP). You can find out who they are here: <http://findyourmp.parliament.uk> or call the House of Commons Information Office on 020 7219 4272.

## Support available through your local authority

Areas in England either have a singular ‘unitary’ tier of local government, or two tiers where a larger county council oversees a district, borough or city council. Two-tiered councils split the provision of services, with the county council overseeing the larger services. For an explanation of the different levels of local government and the division of services, see [www.gov.uk/understand-how-your-council-works/types-of-council](http://www.gov.uk/understand-how-your-council-works/types-of-council)

There is no standard structure for local authorities, but the table below aims to provide you with an overview of the different services and teams that exist, and how they might be able to support your activities.

Local authority team or service area	Responsible for overseeing, <i>and useful to you for:</i>
Sustainability / Climate Change / Energy	Embedding sustainability and climate change considerations within other local council services. Developing strategies and action plans and monitoring the progress of these, e.g. energy consumption, carbon emissions, renewable energy generation. Also may bid for external funding and support project delivery with relevant teams or community contacts.  <i>Useful as a first point of contact with the council, to identify other sources of information and relevant contacts. They are some of the most likely to understand and support what you're trying to achieve, and once on board can help champion your activity.</i>
Neighbourhoods / Communities	Typically your local council will have a team or individual officers responsible for coordinating projects within specific community areas. They may be their own distinct team, or embedded within relevant departments.  <i>Useful for finding out and understanding what community groups and activities are happening in your area and nearby, such as neighbourhood planning activity, community events, etc.</i>

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<p>Environment Team</p>	<p>The environment team may include sustainability and community services, in addition to other environmental protection services such as pollution monitoring, etc.</p> <p><i>Useful for:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Checking the environmental protections that may apply to the area, such as smoke control zones, which may limit the use of biomass boilers and energy from waste.</i></li> <li>• <i>They may also have an understanding of environmental considerations for waterways, woodland and other types of environments.</i></li> </ul>
<p>Planning Department - Development Management / Planning Applications Team</p>	<p>Processing planning applications; for smaller and uncontentious applications they have the ability to make a delegated decision. Otherwise they provide recommendations to cabinet for a decision.</p> <p><i>Useful for:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Finding out who the responsible planning officer is on specific projects.</i></li> <li>• <i>Responding to other planning applications.</i></li> <li>• <i>Offering pre-application advice. They should be engaged early-on in the planning process to build rapport.</i></li> </ul>
<p>Planning Department – Planning Policy / Strategic Planning Teams</p>	<p>Strategic planning, including the local plan; outlining applications for major schemes; interpretation of national policy; supporting planning-related consultations.</p> <p><i>Useful for:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Understanding your local council's interpretation of national policy (e.g. permitted development rights).</i></li> <li>• <i>Accessing and influencing local planning documents and evidence bases, such as sustainable energy studies.</i></li> <li>• <i>Supporting consultations or referendums for your parish, town or neighbourhood plan</i></li> </ul>
<p>Planning Department – Historic Environment / Heritage / Conservation Team</p>	<p>Conservation areas, listed buildings and other heritage assets within your area.</p> <p><i>Useful in:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Seeking guidance on retrofitting for older and/or protected properties.</i></li> <li>• <i>Understanding whether parts of your local area are within a conservation area or whether there are listed buildings</i></li> </ul>
<p>Property Services, Estate Management (they may have an energy management team, or simply an officer responsible for energy within their corporate buildings)</p>	<p>Council buildings and possibly land ownership. Council energy consumption and approach to building management.</p> <p><i>Useful if you wish to deliver projects on non-domestic buildings operated by the council or understand the council's corporate approach to sustainable energy.</i></p>
<p>Parks and Open Spaces, Allotments, Green Spaces, Land Management</p>	<p>Maintenance and management of council-owned land. Can be included in estate management above.</p> <p><i>Useful for planting schemes, collecting waste biomass or for projects on open spaces – such as a community fête.</i></p>

<p>Economic Development / Regeneration / Economic Growth</p>	<p>Embedding local economic considerations within other local council services. Developing strategies and action plans and monitoring their progress, e.g. local job creation, business incubation, developing business districts. Also may bid for external funding and support project delivery with relevant teams or community contacts.</p> <p><i>Useful for: collecting information on local employment, funding opportunities and supporting your activity – community energy projects typically help strengthen your local economy, creating local economic growth in addition to the jobs created to deliver energy projects.</i></p>
<p>Housing</p>	<p>Co-ordination of council services to private and social housing, including council housing where still present. Responsible for meeting Home Energy Conservation Act requirements.</p> <p><i>Useful for:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Engaging with your community; they could help publicise details of events or consultations via their newsletters, mailing lists, etc.</i></li> <li>• <i>Understanding your local council's approach to domestic energy and insulation in their own housing stock and other stock in your area, including the perceptions of and role of the Green Deal and ECO. Understanding the local housing stock – they will often have 'housing condition surveys' that provide details of the construction types, energy efficiency levels and details of occupants.</i></li> <li>• <i>Engaging with their housing partners – housing developers, social housing providers, etc.</i></li> </ul>
<p>Waste and recycling</p>	<p>Waste and recycling services.</p> <p><i>Useful for understanding council approaches to and contracts for waste and recycling; useful if investigating the potential for energy from waste.</i></p>
<p>Finance, Procurement &amp; Legal</p>	<p>These are typically internal services for council operations, though you may have to work with them if you want to access certain council services or buildings. They may also do council tax, trading standards and benefits, or these services may be embedded in other teams.</p>
<p>Adult Services &amp; Healthcare</p>	<p>Responsible for a range of adult and healthcare services, often co-ordinating activity with others in this field such as local charities and NHS trusts.</p> <p><i>Useful for support in publicising plans and engagement activity.</i></p>
<p>Children's and Young People Services / Education</p>	<p>Responsible for a range of services for young people.</p> <p><i>Useful for support in publicising plans and engagement activity.</i></p>

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Changes to the 'general power of competence' brought in through the Localism Act mean that local authorities are now allowed to undertake anything they wish as long as it is not illegal (previously, local authorities were only allowed to undertake actions they were specifically authorised to do). This may provide opportunities for them to take on more innovative and cutting-edge projects to support sustainable communities and low carbon development.

## What is a local plan?

All local planning authorities have to prepare a 'local plan', previously known as a 'local development framework'. This is a suite of documents setting out the development vision for the local area, through the use of planning policies and site allocations. The local plan also includes a statement of community involvement, which shows how the council plans on involving the local community in the preparation of planning. This should include details about when consultations on planning documents are scheduled, and what form these consultations will take.

If you are interested in the consultation process for planning documents, you should also keep in touch with planning policy officers in case there are changes to the schedule. Many councils operate a public consultation database, which you can ask to be added to. You will then receive notification of consultations by post or email. Be aware that consultation periods can be as short as six weeks.

## Parts of the local plan: The core strategy

The core strategy is the central document of the local plan. It establishes a strategic policy framework for how the area will develop over the next 15-30 years, including showing broad areas that have been identified as suitable for specific types of development on a 'proposals map'. Any other more detailed local policy documents must be in accordance with the core strategy. Most local authorities have at least a draft core strategy in place, and many have adopted strategies.

Local authorities are obliged to consult the public and relevant stakeholders at various stages of their core strategy development. Their methods will be set out in the Statement of Community Involvement. Much of the public consultation occurs in the early stages, often taking place at events and online. When documents are published online, they are accompanied by a questionnaire. You can answer as many or as few of the questions as you like. You are also free to suggest alternative options to those proposed, but make sure you provide evidence to demonstrate why they should be considered.

## Supplementary planning documents

Supplementary planning documents (SPDs) are non-statutory documents which go into greater detail about how to meet the policies contained in a local plan. They can be used to give further guidance for development on specific sites, or on particular issues, such as renewable and low carbon energy. They are non-statutory, but they are a material consideration (i.e. they must be taken into account) when looking at planning applications. SPDs are usually prepared by the local authority and all SPDs must go through a six-week public consultation process.

SPDs can offer community groups an opportunity to contribute to local planning policy. Once your local

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authority has completed and adopted its core strategy documents, there is no longer any scope to contribute to core planning policy until they come up for review. In contrast, SPDs can be developed at any time.

Communities or developers can prepare an SPD, but this must be done in collaboration with the local planning authority. For example, a community group could prepare a renewable or low carbon energy SPD, setting out the types of renewable and low carbon technologies that would be acceptable in different parts of the local area.

If you think this might be a route to improving local planning policy in your area, the first thing to do is discuss the idea with planning policy officers in your local council's planning department. It is important to be aware that the development of any SPD imposes responsibilities on the planning department, so you may meet resistance because of the potential extra workload for the officers concerned. If you feel this has happened, try gaining the support of councillors to encourage progress.

SPDs vary greatly, both in content and in length! To give you an idea of what a SPD can look like, have a look at these examples:

- Islington Council Environmental Design SPD, 2012: [www.bit.ly/11BYpSn](http://www.bit.ly/11BYpSn)
- Ashford Borough Council Sustainable Design and Construction SPD, 2012: [www.ashford.gov.uk/sustainable-design-spd](http://www.ashford.gov.uk/sustainable-design-spd)
- Brighton and Hove City Council Sustainable Building Design SPD, 2008: [www.bit.ly/19WOvOG](http://www.bit.ly/19WOvOG)

The Planning Advisory Service's 'Using supplementary planning documents to address climate change locally' (2010) highlights more examples, and shows how local authorities are approaching climate change issues in different ways: [www.pas.gov.uk/pas/aio/553457](http://www.pas.gov.uk/pas/aio/553457)

## The evidence base

Planning policies are supposed to be founded on adequate, up-to-date and relevant evidence, which sets out how they will meet local needs and opportunities for development. In planning, this part of plan-making is referred to as 'the evidence base'.

There are two kinds of evidence that the council needs to produce. Firstly, they need to show that they have adequately taken on board the views of the local community and others who have a stake in the future of the area. A key part of this is through taking account of the Sustainable Community Strategy, which is prepared by the 'local strategic partnership' and sets out the community's visions and aspirations for their area. Your local planning authority should be able to provide you with a copy.

Secondly, they must produce appropriate technical evidence to back up policies in the plan. Examples of evidence base studies include: housing needs assessments, flood risk assessments, sustainable energy opportunities assessments, and land supply assessments. Your council may prepare these internally, if they have the appropriate expertise, otherwise they may need to commission external consultants to prepare the studies on their behalf. Such studies are expensive and your council will not have a limitless budget for them, so may have to prioritise those with greater local need.

Any evidence your council commissions or compiles itself on renewable energy and low-carbon development is likely to be a vital resource for you in arguing the case either for specific projects or for

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changes to policy. Most authorities have a 'local plan evidence' webpage, which details all the evidence they are using. However, there may be cases where this evidence is not so straightforward to obtain – it's always worth asking the planning policy officers for copies of the evidence they are working to. If they say they have no evidence, this is something you need to argue for as part of the consultation on the development of policy.

## When to get involved in local planning

The creation of any planning policy document takes a long time. There is always more than one opportunity to comment on the policies during their development. In general, the earlier you get involved in this process, the better, as this will give you a chance to comment on the broad priorities of the plan as well as the details when these emerge. The nearer a plan gets to completion, the less scope there is to change its content.

Have a look at your council's Local Development Scheme, which will detail what development plan documents make up your area's local plan, and what the timetable is for the development of these documents. The following are the typical stages in the creation of a local plan document:

- 1 **Evidence gathering:** do you have any evidence to contribute, such as any activity on community-led planning or low carbon projects?
- 2 **Alternatives and options:** what do you think of the council's priorities, and of the options they propose to address these priorities – is the low carbon agenda considered a high enough priority?
- 3 **Preferred strategy:** does this document reflect the comments that you and your community have made, or have they failed to address any issues? Does the document pay full regard to your area's sustainable community strategy?
- 4 **Publication:** rather than a public consultation, the six-week publication period is an opportunity for those dissatisfied (or satisfied) with the DPD to make formal representations to the inspector about its soundness – have a look on the Planning Advisory Service website for the definition of 'soundness'.
- 5 **Independent examination by planning inspector:** are there issues you want to raise during this inspection?
- 6 **Adopted plan:** this is open to challenge for a few weeks before being finalised, but only on points of fact and planning law.

The stages of plan development are less clearly defined than before the recent planning reforms, and the degree of consultation will vary depending on the type of local plan document. Local transport plans, area action plans, and supplementary planning documents (SPDs) have different development timetables, but they all go through a similar process of evidence gathering, option and draft policy development, and final policy development.

## Other sources of information

Have a look at the resources on the PlanLoCaL 'Planning permissions' webpage for further advice about engaging with your local authority about planning applications: [www.planlocal.org.uk/pages/localism-and-neighbourhood-planning/planning-permissions](http://www.planlocal.org.uk/pages/localism-and-neighbourhood-planning/planning-permissions)

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Planning Help – Shape your local area: [www.planninghelp.org.uk/improve-where-you-live/shape-your-local-area](http://www.planninghelp.org.uk/improve-where-you-live/shape-your-local-area)

ACRE Community Led Planning Toolkit: [www.bit.ly/12rXioC](http://www.bit.ly/12rXioC)

Planning Aid Handy Guide to Planning 2012: [www.bit.ly/XKpoK2](http://www.bit.ly/XKpoK2)

TCPA Your Place, Your Plan: short guide to local planning process: [www.bit.ly/dW8rgr](http://www.bit.ly/dW8rgr)

‘Green up! Five ways to work with your council on the environment and sustainability’ guidance report by the Community Development Foundation (2009): [www.bit.ly/15m4uVT](http://www.bit.ly/15m4uVT)

‘Understand how your council works’, Government guidance on how different local councils are structured and where decision making happens: [www.gov.uk/understand-how-your-council-works/types-of-council](http://www.gov.uk/understand-how-your-council-works/types-of-council)

The Planning Portal provides links to your local authorities different sections on planning and provides an address search function: [www.bit.ly/13ut72l](http://www.bit.ly/13ut72l)

If you are struggling to get data from your local council or would like to compare your local area with neighbouring Local Authorities, try:

Neighbourhood Statistics: <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination>

Open Data Communities: <http://opendatacommunities.org/data>