

**September 2021**



## **Council climate action: energy**

Thanks to the work of grassroots campaigners, the majority of councils have adopted Climate Action Plans for their areas. We now need to make sure these plans are as ambitious as possible and can be translated into tangible action. This guide explains what your council can do to support the growth of renewable energy and prevent new fossil fuel extraction. Find out how to ensure energy isn't wasted and how to transition rapidly to renewable energy in your local area.

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## Councils, climate and energy

Generating electricity is responsible for around 23% of UK greenhouse gas emissions. As demand rises due to the transition towards electric heating and electric vehicles, it's essential that we scale up low-carbon generation and use energy more efficiently.

Renewable energy such as solar and wind is the cleanest and cheapest way to generate electricity, so it makes sense to invest in and increase our supply of UK renewables. Not only is this good for the planet, but it'll also keep energy bills down in the future and boost our energy security. In contrast, pursuing new, climate-wrecking fossil fuel extraction risks locking us into volatile pricing and high bills for decades to come.

A big increase in offshore wind – as committed to in the UK's energy strategy – would bring us closer to 100% renewable electricity, heating and transport, without competing with other land uses. But we'll also need a significant increase in onshore wind power, with onshore wind turbines still a highly efficient use of land. Ground-mounted solar also has a contribution to make, as well as smaller solar panels on buildings. Both onshore wind and ground-mounted solar can be combined with other land uses, including producing food.

Although the government hasn't yet given sufficient support to all renewables and uncertainties about its future policies remain, councils can still help tackle these issues:

- **Renewable energy** – Councils have a role to play in significantly growing renewable energy generation through their Local Plan or Supplementary Planning Documents. They can also require the installation of renewables such as solar thermals, solar panels or heat pumps in council developments, as well as within private and public sector developments. In addition, supporting the development of renewable energy and energy storage can benefit local workers through the provision of skills training.
- **Energy saving** – Councils should lead by example and reduce energy use in their own buildings. They should also switch street lighting in the area to well-designed and well-directed LED lights. Using renewable energy such as solar panels on council housing can help residents save on their fuel bills as well. For more information on how to address energy efficiency and tackle fuel poverty, see our [council climate action guide on homes and buildings](#).
- **Opposing fossil fuel extraction** – As well as supporting renewable energy generation, councils should do what they can to prevent the development of new fossil fuel extraction by opposing fracking, oil exploration or any other extraction projects in their area. They should stand alongside communities and support peaceful protest against dirty energy. It's worth knowing that, despite overturning the fracking moratorium, the government has said fracking will only happen with communities' consent, demonstrating the potential power of local opposition.
- **Divesting funds from fossil fuels** – Councils should also divest all their investments, including any pension funds, from fossil fuels and invest in renewable energy projects instead.

## The target

Councils need to show ambition on a par with the climate and cost-of-living crises. With existing resourcing and powers, a reasonable target for councils to aim for is:

To enable and support the growth and use of renewable energy, ensure energy isn't wasted, and prevent the development of new fossil fuel extraction.

## Challenges

Some government policies are making renewable energy generation difficult for councils.

While it's set a target for increasing **offshore** wind power, the government doesn't yet have one for increasing **onshore** wind power, and planning policy barriers have severely restrained the development of this clean energy source. Friends of the Earth has calculated that we need 3 to 4 times as much onshore wind by 2030 to meet the UK's carbon reduction targets. The government's Growth Plan, published in September 2022, does refer to putting onshore wind development on a par with other infrastructure, which suggests that existing barriers may be removed. However, it's unclear how this'll be implemented in practice, and it'll take time for new policies promoting onshore wind to be developed.

The future of ground-mounted solar panels is also uncertain following the government's suggestions that solar farms may be prohibited on most farmland.

Alongside the lack of support for renewable energy generation, the government is pushing ahead with new fossil fuel projects as well, for example issuing new oil and gas licences for the North Sea. When fossil fuel extraction is backed at a national level, it makes it harder for councils and local communities to transition from dirty to clean energy.

## Councils leading the way

Some councils are already making strides in the transition away from fossil fuels towards renewables. [Share these examples with your council using this template email](#) and help inspire them to take action.

Although national planning policy doesn't support onshore wind, Stroud District Council is still taking a proactive approach. It's [encouraging new wind and solar installations](#) by identifying suitable locations in the area as part of its Local Plan.

Lancaster City Council has also taken a proactive approach to [enable wind energy generation in its area](#), by including a "wind energy opportunity area" map in its Local Plan. In fact, Lancaster has conducted a prompt review of its Local Plan as a whole to ensure the policies it contains will help tackle the climate crisis.

Cambridgeshire County Council's [first solar farm went live in 2017](#) and generates enough energy to power 3,000 homes. The council is now investing in more solar farms and battery storage, which are helping cut emissions in the area while raising revenue for the council. It's also aiming to make all council-owned and council-operated buildings free from fossil fuels by 2025.

Dundee City Council recognises that local efforts to cut carbon will fail without a workforce with the skills to deliver the solutions. Alongside greater investment and innovation in renewable energy systems, it's therefore [providing training in partnership with local businesses, universities and colleges to help develop workers' skills](#).

In September 2016 the London Borough of Waltham Forest became the first local authority in the UK to announce its [aim to fully divest its pension funds away from fossil fuels](#). In September 2022 it reached full divestment, making it the first council to achieve this. Waltham Forest is instead investing in companies involved in renewable energy.

## Learn from others

Some groups have already been working within their communities to combat the issue. For example, members of Manchester Friends of the Earth worked with groups in the area to set up [Greater Manchester Community Renewables](#) (GMCR). The community scheme has raised over £350,000 to fund the installation of solar panels on 8 primary schools in Salford and Bury and a community centre in Partington. Their partners receive electricity generated by the solar panels at a discounted rate, members of the community who buy shares receive annual interest payments, and surplus profits go into a community fund to support carbon reduction, energy efficiency and environmental education projects. It's a great example of local groups leading the way and showing how local solutions can work with, and for, the community.

Could your group do something similar?

Another example of groups who've tackled the issue are Central Lancashire Friends of the Earth, Frack Free Lancashire and the Frack Free Nanas. These groups came together as part of the anti-fracking campaign at Preston New Road and other sites in Lancashire – carrying out peaceful protests, lobbying politicians, organising events and convincing Lancashire County Council to refuse fracking planning applications – all of which helped contribute to the 2019 fracking moratorium. The community in Lancashire came together again in 2022 to successfully fight fracking for a second time following the lifting of the moratorium. These groups, along with others across the country, have now defeated fracking not once but twice – showing just how powerful it can be when councils and communities work together.

## Convince your council

Councils are more amenable to introducing schemes that have a wide array of benefits, as it generally means they're more cost effective. If you're in contact with your local council about renewable energy, make sure to point out the co-benefits. They include:

- More jobs – it's estimated that 150,000 jobs could be created in the UK's renewable energy sector by 2030. Use our [“Near You” tool](#) to find out how many green jobs could be created in your area (enter your postcode and navigate to the “Community” tab).
- Revenue – investment in renewables can generate revenue for the council, as demonstrated by Cambridgeshire County Council's solar farms (see above).
- Warmer homes and lower bills – installing renewables in council buildings can cut bills and, in the case of council housing, help keep residents warm. Barnsley Council, in collaboration with community energy scheme Energise Barnsley, has [fitted rooftop solar panels on 321 homes](#), saving a collective £278,844 for tenants on electricity bills between 2017 and 2021.

Lack of money is often a reason given for councils not being able to act – and it's true that councils have suffered a decade of cuts. However, there are ways for councils to raise money for investing in renewable energy.

For example, Warrington Borough Council [raised £1 million using community municipal bonds](#) to develop a solar farm and a battery storage facility. Several other councils are now developing local climate bonds, which allow people to invest in carbon cutting schemes for as little as £5. Cambridgeshire County Council borrowed from the Public Works Loan Board to invest in its ambitious solar farm plans. The new UK Infrastructure Bank is now open to local authorities and could also be used to fund clean energy projects.

Local authorities may be concerned about the level of backing for progressive policies on issues that are perceived to be controversial, such as proactively identifying sites for onshore wind – on this issue, they should be reassured that [recent polls clearly show the majority of people want more onshore wind farms](#).

More generally, one of the best ways to convince your council is to build public support and to work with others, especially those beyond the environmental movement such as trade unions, to show you're not acting alone. As demonstrated by the strength of the Frack Free movement, [when communities come together](#), councils have to listen! You might want to reach out to your local [UK Divest group](#) or [Fossil Free group](#) to work together on this issue.

We've found that most [best practice examples of councils acting on climate involve them working in partnership](#) with local businesses, institutions and communities. For example, supporting community energy initiatives could help councils to engage more people as well as deliver the solutions. Building strong relationships with councils can therefore be key to getting them on board and achieving positive change.

## Funding and powers

Action by central government will empower councils to do more. Councils can and are acting now, but it's hard to find a council able to act across all the areas they need to and at the scale and pace commensurate to the climate and ecological emergencies. That's why they need additional powers and resources. Central government can help by:

- Removing barriers in the planning system to onshore wind development.
- Producing clearer planning guidance to allow local authorities to reject applications for fossil fuel extraction.
- Restoring the moratorium on fracking.
- Stopping to issue new licences for oil and gas exploration.
- Aligning levelling up and skills funding to net zero goals so that people can be trained in renewable technologies and installation.

Friends of the Earth has joined local government organisations, academics and other NGOs in setting out [a Blueprint of what's needed from national government to support councils](#) in key policy areas, including retrofitting and planning. The coalition has assessed how the government is doing so far in its [progress tracker](#). Be sure to ask your council to sign up to the Blueprint if it hasn't done so already.

## Helpful resources

Find out what progress your local area has already made on this topic with our handy [data tool, “Near you”](#).

Watch our training video and learn what your council can do to back clean, green energy:

Find out how you can [build a strong campaign](#) to push your council to take ambitious action in this area.

Read more examples of [best practice by councils](#).

Find out how your council is doing by looking at its [Council Climate Action Scorecard, ?](#) created by Climate Emergency UK.

Find out more about [community energy and projects](#) in your area.

Any references to national policy in this guide relate to policy under the previous government and reflect the policy context at the time it was written.