

Energy Security and Net Zero Committee

Oral evidence:

[Unlocking community energy at scale, HC 394](#)

Wednesday 12 November 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Bill Esterson (Chair); Ms Polly Billington; Lizzi Collinge; Torcuil Crichton; Graeme Downie; Wera Hobhouse; Mike Reader; Claire Young.

Questions 225 - 317

Witnesses

I: Councillor Emily O'Brien, Climate Change Cabinet member, Lewes District Council, and UK100 Climate Leadership Academy Graduate; Tanuja Pandit, CEO, Power Up North London; and Eleanor Radcliffe, Project Manager, Energy Commons Team, Carbon Co-op.

II: Robbie Calvert, Head of Policy, and Public Affairs, Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI); Dan Stone, Policy, and Influencing Officer, Centre for Sustainable Energy; and Jenny Wigley KC, Planning Barrister, Landmark Chambers.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [UK100](#)
- [Carbon Co-op](#)
- [Royal Town Planning Institute \(RTPI\)](#)
- [Centre for Sustainable Energy](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Councillor Emily O'Brien, Tanuja Pandit and Eleanor Radcliffe.

Q225 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Energy Security Net Zero Select Committee, which is the fourth session of our community energy at scale inquiry. Today we will be looking at the local planning challenges that community energy groups face as they attempt to navigate the complexities of the local planning system. We will also be looking at whether reforms are necessary.

Welcome to our first panel. If you can introduce yourself, starting with Eleanor Radcliffe, please.

Eleanor Radcliffe: Hi. I am a project manager in the energy commons team at Carbon Co-op. We are a Manchester-based registered community benefit society. We design the tools, services, and models that we need to decarbonise homes and communities, so decarbonisation is our main goal. We started as a retrofit co-operative. Now we mainly do innovation projects.

Tanuja Pandit: Good afternoon. I am the chief executive of Power Up North London. We are a London-based community energy group that delivers decarbonisation projects for public buildings like schools, community centres, and churches. We also support people who are struggling with their energy bills. We have been going for 10 years, and we work across North London boroughs.

Councillor O'Brien: Hi. I am a councillor at Lewes District Council on the south coast, where I am the cabinet member for climate, nature, and food systems, and where we have an 18-year partnership with our local community energy sector. I am primarily here today on behalf of UK100, which is a network of about 120 councils—those who are really committed to climate action. I am largely speaking on their behalf, but I will bring in a little bit of experience from my own council as well.

Chair: Thank you all much. You are welcome. We look forward to hearing your evidence. We will start the questioning with Mike Reader.

Q226 **Mike Reader:** Good afternoon, all three of you. I am going to ask questions around planning. We have already had some evidence sessions and have heard that there are some challenges in the process. I would like your views on the NPPF, and whether it hinders or facilitates the planning application process.

I am going to start with you, Emily. Does the National Planning Policy Framework hinder or facilitate planning application processes for community energy products?

Councillor O'Brien: As a council, we are strongly committed to community energy. We have actively supported and empowered local projects over many years, embedding this commitment in our corporate



plan and strategic priorities. However, we also carry the responsibility of being a planning authority. In that role, the current NPPF restricts our ability to provide the support we would like through the planning system. In particular, the removal of the previous NPPF paragraph has made it harder to advance community energy initiatives.

Q227 Mike Reader: Can you give us an example of how the new NPPF does that?

Councillor O'Brien: At present, what would be helpful is formal recognition that smaller-scale community energy projects—for example, a 5 MW solar farm delivering direct benefits to the local community—are fundamentally different from large commercial developments. Our planners need a clear mechanism to distinguish between the two. The removal of paragraph 161 from the previous NPPF, which explicitly identified community energy, has taken away that lever and left us without the policy support needed to reflect this distinction in planning decisions.

Obviously, as a planning authority, we are free to develop our own local planning policy, provided it is not incompatible. We seek to do that. We have consulted on specific support for community energy and there was widespread support for that, but it is not yet in place. That is representative of a council that really cares about those things. If we are going to scale up, what we need is a level playing field for community energy, not just a few councils that make the extra effort.

Q228 Mike Reader: Tanuja, we have heard evidence that community energy projects certainly do give benefits back to the community, but equally we have heard that commercial developments can do the same. Is it not a level playing field already, or do you think Emily is right that it is not fair for community energy projects within the planning system?

Tanuja Pandit: The struggle is that, as they are currently set, the rules are sometimes quite complex for local planners to interpret. As a result of that, it becomes a bit of a variable in the responses that you get from local authorities in borough A versus borough B.

The local teams are not well resourced. Staff are not particularly well trained. To give a specific example, the permitted development rules for solar are so complex to interpret that one of the teams in a community entry group in London told me yesterday—because I was taking evidence from colleagues on the matter—that they had to produce a flow chart to explain to the planners how to interpret the permitted development rules for solar, and that it really should not be that difficult. What that means is that it is tough for community energy groups to navigate that system and process in interpreting those rules.

Q229 Mike Reader: We have heard that there are many groups looking to do community energy and it is a big part of Clean Power 2030. Does that network of knowledge sharing already exist? Given that we are only a few



years away from needing to meet the clean power target, why do you think that people are still scrambling around to understand the process?

Tanuja Pandit: That is a question for the authorities that fund these roles within local authorities where these decisions are made about different planning applications.

Q230 **Mike Reader:** Do you do anything like that at a local level in North London?

Tanuja Pandit: We are constantly coming up against challenges with the planning system. There are several challenges in London. One challenge is that you have lots of conservation areas and listed buildings. The other challenge is the specific example of a community centre where we participated in a detailed decarbonisation project in 2023.

We had to undergo quite a detailed planning process for an air source heat pump at the community centre. Then we discovered at quite a late stage that, because of the decibel limit set by our local council, we had to invest £17,000 of our grant money to produce a bespoke acoustic unit that would reduce the sound from the air source heat pump by a couple of decibels. I think now that rule has changed and the decibel limit is higher. If we had gone a couple of years later, we might not have had to spend that money. That just highlights the types of challenges that we see within the planning system.

Q231 **Mike Reader:** Eleanor, you are part of a national team with the Carbon Co-op doing this sort of thing. What do you think are the biggest challenges that people face in terms of the planning process to deliver community energy projects?

Eleanor Radcliffe: I would say the predominant amount of work that we do is within Greater Manchester, but we have a good understanding of the area and the role of the strategic authority within that context as well.

Just speaking to some of your previous questions in relation to planning—particularly with a focus on local authorities as the implementer at the local level—planners do not tend to have a huge amount of training around energy. Significant upskilling is required to make sure that planners understand energy systems in general and how that relates to spatial planning. I know that there is a question mark about the overlap between spatial and energy planning, and the gap there is a challenge.

On behalf of community energy organisations, when it comes to planning, just navigating local authorities and figuring out who is the right person to enter those spaces is a challenge. A lot of the time climate and sustainability officers function as the linchpin and support them in navigating those internal processes. They end up with a huge amount of knowledge relating to climate, sustainability and energy work. The challenge is making sure that local authorities are sufficiently resourced to act as a support for community energy groups, because accessing and



acting as a broker for different sites, for example—given that community energy organisations struggle to find the right sites for their future projects—is a big factor for them, especially in Greater Manchester.

Q232 Mike Reader: I am conscious of the time for my slot. Do any of you have any recommendation as to how that skills gap could be closed, particularly given there is a definite target from the Government on clean power by 2030, so we need it now. Emily, do you have any recommendations on how we can close that skills gap?

Councillor O'Brien: I am wary of speaking purely on planning, but I do think we have to recognise that the planning system itself is quite stretched. As Eleanor was just explaining, one of the ways that councils have successfully supported local community energy to navigate is through their climate or energy officers. I know budgets are tight, and I think in some councils that those roles have been stretched by other commitments.

However, if we are serious about scaling up not just community but municipal energy—I do think it is important we talk about community and municipal, because in some areas councils could be the people taking projects forward—there needs to be, at least in the short term, some additional resource found to support those roles, or the whole thing will fall over and we will not make our gigawatts.

Q233 Mike Reader: A quick question because I am over time. The Reform Party now runs my council. It has banned the use of net zero. It has banned council focus on stuff like clean energy. Is that a significant risk to the Government's plan if we see more councils go to a political party that does not believe in community energy?

Councillor O'Brien: There is a risk around the consensus. I also have a role with the Local Government Association. We have been looking at the statutory duty and the powers and resources needed to deliver that. There is a blip around the consensus at the minute, which is disappointing. However, I do think there are so many economic arguments around community energy, and so many arguments around engagement in other forms. For many people, buying a share in their local community energy project may be the first shares they have ever bought.

There are strong messages that can cut across around energy security as well. There is a lot of fear about what could happen in an uncertain world. I do think there are strong messages that cut across that, but support for that sector would not necessarily be jeopardised by a council that was less supportive if it were introduced in a mandated way, I would say.

Q234 Torcuil Crichton: Thank you all for coming in. I will get into the weeds of planning as well. First, to pick up on what Mike was asking about this network of sharing and that skills gap, I want to ask you all what your experience of GB Energy is, because the Government set up GB Energy.



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There is a huge commitment to community energy in that. Have you had any help, support or expertise on GB Energy?

Eleanor Radcliffe: We have had interactions with GB Energy. I know that my colleague Jonathan has been involved in conversations around the local power plan. In terms of our direct support, not yet. We are still waiting to see how things play out. Obviously, we have views on what would be helpful for the sector in terms of support, particularly in terms of what would be useful in bridging that gap between community energy and municipal energy, as Emily has talked about. There is a key role for GB Energy, and particularly the local power plan, in supporting the bridging at the local scale. I am not sure what that looks like yet, but that has been our experience.

Tanuja Pandit: We have not seen any support, and we have not had contact with GB Energy at the level of my individual organisation up until now. I cannot speak for Community Energy London, so I would have to check into that and come back to you.

Councillor O'Brien: We have had helpful and supportive conversations, through community energy. Community Energy Pathways is based in Lewes. In fact, it has its offices in one of our council buildings now and we have a strong partnership. At a strategic level, we are hearing good things, supportive of the direction.

For me, the gap is a little bit like what Eleanor was saying. For instance, for a larger council-led project that we have been looking at, we have had some useful conversations with the Community Wealth Fund, and the former National Infrastructure Bank, which has changed its approach so that it is not just about being a lender. It is also understanding the process and where there potentially needs to be some underwriting and de-risking. There must be a good role for GB Energy in playing that role on a smaller scale, because that only works for big projects.

There is quite a high threshold for that support and there is a massive gap because what happens, particularly with these kinds of larger scale projects, which we want to see community energy moving into, is they wait for ages to get a grid connection. I am sure you have talked about that in other sessions. It is a bit of a nightmare. They get their grid connection and then a lot of money must be found at quite short notice.

Those milestones are fast. That is fine if you are a big energy provider that has a pipeline, and you can juggle your resources. It is catastrophic for an organisation that is just looking to do something locally. I think GB Energy could play a role in being a de-risking lender at that point.

Q235 **Torcuil Crichton:** From all the answers, I get the idea that GB Energy is not taking the lessons from Lewes and replicating them in Manchester, so that Manchester does not have to reinvent the wheel again.



Councillor O'Brien: Could I come back to you on that, because obviously I am speaking for a network? I think we could give you evidence of that, but I cannot do it now.

Q236 **Torcuil Crichton:** Yes, good connections are a nightmare—and that is another chapter—but planning can be a nightmare as well. Would it not be easier to get community energy off the ground and off the runway if community ownership were a material consideration in planning? You have more experience than anyone on that, Emily.

Councillor O'Brien: Yes, I am happy to start with that one. Absolutely, I would welcome that. It was disappointing that the specific wording was removed. We would love our planning system to support community energy. It is important, but it is difficult—this may not be the best company to say it in—because sometimes the planning system feels a bit like a national system disguised as local accountability, but most of the rules are made nationally. We have limited scope within that. It would help to have it clear in the NPPF, and I welcome the work that I know is going on elsewhere around producing a definition of community energy that is watertight.

Q237 **Torcuil Crichton:** That is what I was going to come to. Eleanor, I know a community when I see one, but simply pretending that something is a community energy company does not make it a community energy company. So how do we get that definition and just guarantee it?

Eleanor Radcliffe: There is a huge amount of work going on around this, so I do not want to preclude anything that comes out of that. My perspective on this is very much that a definition of community energy needs to make sure that it is recognising the breadth of what is possible through community energy, not just generation. Within our work, thinking about energy service models, local flexibility services, retrofit and heat, retrofit co-operatives—in our view, those all come within the scope of community energy.

Community energy is predominantly about community ownership and control within the system and making sure that there are things like asset locks in case a company goes bankrupt. We need to ensure that that is in there, along with a requirement that community benefit is at the heart of the model that exists. That needs to be in there. Being clear about what the model is, whether there are rules and the way that membership functions for a community energy organisation needs to be clear within the definitions as well. Otherwise, it can become too loose and easily misinterpreted.

Q238 **Torcuil Crichton:** Tanjua and Emily, if we get to the stage where community energy projects are a material consideration in planning; we define what community is and what benefit comes to my community; and I am a councillor sitting on a planning application where, if I approve this planning application, that money is going to come to my ward, how do we stop that perception of bribery or skipping the queue because the



money is going to come here?

Tanuja Pandit: There is always going to be an element of subjectivity in those decisions. The important piece for me is thinking about the social value, the co-benefits, and the social benefits of community energy projects. Speaking from the front line where I have been operating for the last eight years in London, the sorts of projects where we are helping community buildings to decarbonise are the types of projects that often do not meet the commercial return threshold for providers. Therefore, these organisations would not have had access to decarbonisation interventions if we had not been involved. That is one thing.

The other aspect is that community energy groups are populated by professional volunteers. These are people who in their day jobs are holding important renewables roles in industry. They come to us and provide us with support on either a pro bono or a low bono basis to deliver these projects. The reason they do that is because they get personal value out of that. That is also something that their employers are aware of and encourage them to do.

We can bring to these groups that have little ability to access technical or financial resources both the technical skills that they need to deliver those projects and the financial resources. I can say specifically that at Power Up North London we have had professional architectural firms and engineering practices give us their support with planning applications, with rooftop surveys—projects that would have cost thousands of pounds, and they have enabled us to do that for free.

Torcuil Crichton: What you are describing there is what GB Energy should be doing.

Chair: I am going to have to interrupt. We are on a tight time limit today. I am going to ask Polly Billington to briefly ask a follow-up question.

Q239 **Ms Polly Billington:** The Government have announced or committed to an 8 GW contribution of community energy to Clean Power 2030. In the context of what you are saying, do you think it needs to be—a bit like every local plan must contribute to the 1.5 million homes—that every local authority should be contributing to that 8 GW? How would the rules need to change for local authorities to be able to step up and achieve that?

I also need to declare an interest, in that I was the founder director of UK100.

Councillor O'Brien: Rather than a mandate, which is always tricky, if you give a council a number, or municipal and community energy a number, that is not as effective as empowering them to deliver—

Q240 **Ms Polly Billington:** How else are we going to get to 8 GW, then?



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Councillor O'Brien: The UK100 network now represents 120-odd councils. It is about 60% of residents in the UK, and there is strong interest in this agenda and in delivering. However, the problem is the other way around, isn't it? It is the barriers to delivery.

Q241 **Ms Polly Billington:** What rules need to change for that 8 GW to be achieved?

Councillor O'Brien: The issues with the lack of clarity in the national planning system, and the issues that have been identified in the lack of capacity, particularly at council level, are in being able to support and enable those pathways to happen. What we have at the minute is a series of competitive pots, which are not enough. They are accessed by those who are already most empowered and able to do it. If we are serious about scaling up, we need to roll that out more widely.

What I think will happen is investable projects. In a sense, that money coming in is short term. It is a bit like the first time that I got solar panels on my house. There was a beneficial feed-in tariff because it was new, it was risky, and nobody really knew what would happen. By the time I got solar panels on my latest house, there was no feed-in tariff because the prices had come down. That is the scaling up that we want to see around community energy, isn't it? The UK100 network is calling for that—for a kind of concerted approach to non-competitive funding and support.

The other barrier is technical knowledge. For our local community energy company, we ended up funding local partnerships who are the LGA offshoot who do that. The processes are very technical. We ended up funding some support for them. Because we are a committed council, we were doing that, but that should be the kind of support that is coming from elsewhere.

Q242 **Ms Polly Billington:** We rely on committed councils to get us to 8 GW by 2030.

Councillor O'Brien: The other argument is that there are parallel asks going on at the minute, and the other ask that I would support is around shared ownership. There should be a percentage of large-scale projects that then have an element of community ownership. I imagine that is something that is discussed. This is a separate thing.

Just to be clear, because we are talking about planning, I do not think that should trigger this pathway for community projects planning that we are talking about, but it is an important mechanism around building that capacity. That will be quite game changing, and will see that scaling up going on. I do think that the 8 GW will be achieved. Without community energy and, indeed, municipal energy as well, which I think is likely to become a bigger part—I would hate this Committee to find a solution that works for community energy but did not work for council action.

Chair: We are going to have to move on. Graeme.



Q243 Graeme Downie: Thank you very much, Chair. Just picking up on some of the issues that Torcuil and Polly raised, and you talked about local authorities being good at this and some less so. How do we try to bring them together? Are there things that can be done centrally—particularly through planning rules—to support community energy projects specifically, but local authorities as well, to build that capacity that you were talking about there, Tanuja, inside these groups to try to move everyone forward at a better pace so we do not have that situation where some are carrying a disproportionate load?

Tanuja Pandit: Is the question about the capacity within community energy groups or within the local councils?

Q244 Graeme Downie: A little bit of both. Are there areas where local authorities can play a larger role inside community energy groups to help build capacity and encourage some joint working as well, where in some cases the local authority might be pulling the community energy group and in others it might be the other way round?

Tanuja Pandit: It is a handshake between the local authorities and community energy groups. Not all community energy groups are homogeneous. Some are single project organisations. Some organisations are much bigger and have done a whole raft of quite diverse projects.

There is scope for knowledge sharing, and that is where organisations like Community Energy London come in. It is doing various mentorship programmes and partnering programmes between community energy groups. It is also organising various events with local councils to explain to them what community energy groups can do. Those are useful networking opportunities across the board. All of that is good and should be done, and it will contribute to reducing the barriers between local authorities and community energy groups.

Also, just to quickly mention the 8 GW target. Community Energy London has a solar opportunity map that has identified thousands of community buildings across London that have solar potential. The statistics say that over 11,000 of those buildings together can contribute 1 GW of power if we put solar on them. There is scope to do this, but right now we are all struggling with limited resources. Local authorities have the same challenge as us. We are also struggling with limited resources and could do with more.

Eleanor Radcliffe: Can I add to that? It is important to acknowledge—this is based on our work in Greater Manchester—the need to bring up local authorities and community energy organisations but also to support that sharing practice and bridging between those groups. We need to recognise the potential role of strategic authorities and that scale within this too, because Community Energy London is a brilliant organisation. Its connection with the GLA is interesting and important.



If you look at the work that has happened in the south-west, for example, I know that Bristol has a solid community energy network, which had a big impact on the Bristol City Leap project. So that networking function—the function of convening within strategic authorities—is significant. We know that GMCA are interested in that, but currently that practice is limited and driven by the community energy sector. That is not a bad thing, but it means that it is not necessarily being applied across different places in a way that could network different offices, different local authorities and different community energy groups together to drive practice that is informed by local connection as well. From our perspective in Carbon Co-op, that is something that is incredibly valuable.

Q245 Graeme Downie: That leads me on to the next question about local area energy plans. How useful are they, and how useful could they be for community energy projects, both at a renewable scale but also on the work you are talking about around buildings as well? What is the co-ordinated role that they could have?

Eleanor Radcliffe: I will start with that one. Local area energy plans are extremely helpful from a technical perspective in terms of understanding the requirements locally for transition if you view it that way. The challenge with local area energy plans is that the agenda is set by the DNO level. When you look at the data, within Greater Manchester—Greater Manchester was a trailblazer for this—it is based on substation level. It does not map to ward level data. When it comes to actual usefulness for local authorities, in terms of turning a plan into action, it is a plan in terms of presenting the data spatially, but it does not give a clear idea of where to go next and how to get to where you need to go.

From our perspective, I would say that there needs to be something that follows a local area energy plan connected to the planning process, potentially through neighbourhood planning. We have a process called community-led energy planning and a more granular level of information and knowledge to inform what is going to gain traction and support locally.

Q246 Graeme Downie: Are there ways to involve communities in that at an early stage to help shape those plans and make sure you have that kind of buy-in from an early stage?

Councillor O'Brien: I agree. One of the asks of UK100 is around having proper funding for local authorities. That could include developing local area energy plans, which would be one way to help deliver those targets as well. It is also important to note that if you are going to do a project on the ground or look at an area, you still need a much more granular level set of data and planning. It is not enough to have a region or an area, even at a local area energy plan level.

What we have seen locally through Community Energy Pathways and through OVESCO, a local organisation, is local level stuff. There is one



village, Barcombe, which has seen community-led planning—a bit like Eleanor has been describing—to take that village off-grid. Also, as a council, we have funded work at a neighbourhood level around parish and town councils to do that kind of energy planning. Those granular bits of data are important, not least because once local area energy plans are written they go out of date quite quickly.

In our area, we have loads of development and infrastructure reinforcement. One of the key things, which is cheaper as well—although, just to be clear, it is not the gold standard UK100 ask—is access to the data that DNOs are compiling about what the plans are. We have good practice locally working with UK power networks serving that.

Q247 Graeme Downie: Is there a role for the local area energy plans and some of the work you are describing overcoming some of the risk factors you see inside councils, who immediately hear “community energy” and tend to back away if they are not leading, as some of the ones you are representing are? Is there a way to use the action plans to build confidence in the planning system beyond just the rules that are handed down?

Councillor O'Brien: Yes. The bigger asks are around the national planning rules. I do not think it is lack of local area energy plans that are not giving confidence in the planning system. That is the national ask. Likewise, in some areas it has been useful doing local area energy planning processes, and that is why it is an ask of UK100, but that is not the only way to build confidence going forward.

Investable projects will come through local area energy plans but will also come outside of it. People will get together in an area and want to do something, or the DNO might identify an area where there is capacity. It would not need to come through a specific plan. It is an important ask, and it is a UK100 ask, but there are other things that need to happen alongside it. It is not a magic bullet that would fix the rest.

Q248 Wera Hobhouse: This is developing the theme. Local people can obviously be very much involved, and we know the benefits of local people being involved in local area energy plans. Can you spell out for me the real benefits of having local people involved in that energy planning?

Tanuja Pandit: First, they are voluntary efforts by local authorities, and I think that should change. The important piece about local area energy planning is that you can take a more strategic view on a local area rather than a tactical approach. What happens now with community energy projects is that it is very much down to word of mouth if somebody comes to you—say, a governor at the school. It is very tactical, whereas if you take a strategic view of an area and you understand what the needs are in a much more concerted way with the communities involved as equal partners, I feel you can get a much better outcome.



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My sense is that community energy groups can make a significant contribution to local area energy plans. We would love to be involved as strategic partners, but we do not necessarily have the resources right now to do it in any meaningful way, so we would need to be resourced if we were going to contribute.

Wera Hobhouse: From everything we are hearing, it is to give it a statutory footing, isn't it?

Tanuja Pandit: Yes.

Q249 **Wera Hobhouse:** I was a councillor many years ago and I remember we developed supplementary planning documents. Should all councils develop supplementary planning documents around this to strengthen the support for community energy?

Eleanor Radcliffe: Can I come in briefly on that? I think that supplementary planning documents are one way to embed this within local planning systems, but it is not systemic, as Emily has been talking about, in terms of rectifying what is in the NPPF. Just to speak to your previous point, when it comes to involving communities in local area energy planning and the benefits of that, I know from colleagues at the low carbon hub in Oxfordshire, for example, about engaging people in the process of local area energy planning but at a hyperlocal level, so community-led energy planning, upskilling the community to be able to engage in planning decisions around energy generally.

In our experience in Oldham, communities do not have the confidence to engage in those conversations. It feels highly technical and very removed from their everyday experience, whereas, in reality, communities have the knowledge. They understand how they use energy every day, how they travel, how they use heat—they understand all those elements. Being able to ensure that people recognise that they have the knowledge and also the language to engage in planning decisions in Oxfordshire has meant that the community has engaged with the council on a supplementary planning document and got that over the line, on energy planning within their locality.

It is not just supplementary planning documents that support community energy in general within a locality. There is the potential at that granular level to consider supplementary planning documents within the context of community-led energy planning to set the trajectory, and I guess the requirements from local communities about what they expect in local benefits and what they would like from those developments.

Q250 **Wera Hobhouse:** Can I just understand the sequence? If you already have local people involved in local energy planning, I understand there is a concern that it is too much led from the top or from the region with DNOs. You would fix that to involve local people more in the local area energy plans and then back that up with a supplementary planning document because you have already engaged with people, so they



understand what you are talking about.

Eleanor Radcliffe: Potentially. Local area energy planning is predominantly delivered at local authority level. What I am talking about with the more granular scale is more at ward level. It is a secondary process, and it functions differently. There are still ways of engaging people in local area energy planning, but the way that we understand how that would happen is through, for example, community energy organisations and the local VCSE sector, who understand the needs of communities from a more social and economic perspective rather than an energy perspective.

Bringing those organisations in as key stakeholders within a local area energy plan is important, but from our perspective and in terms of how you deliver infrastructure on the ground, if you have priority areas delivering a process with communities, like community-led energy planning, that means people can inform the benefits that come out of specific projects in their areas. For example, if there was a district heat network being put in or a solar array, they could engage in the conversations about the infrastructure that is going to come and be able to set the trajectory for the local benefits that should be delivered for them as an area.

It is a secondary process, but I still think that local area energy planning should involve community energy organisations and the wider VCSE sector to make sure that the social and economic outcomes wanted for the area are incorporated as a factor if possible.

Q251 **Wera Hobhouse:** Very quickly, why can community energy groups not be directly involved in the local area planning?

Eleanor Radcliffe: They could be, but they are not a primary stakeholder within the context of the planning. I feel that Emily might be able to speak to this better than I can.

Councillor O'Brien: I think that good practice in local area energy planning brings in and must bring in community energy, particularly if we are going to be realistic about delivering. Community energy does not just deliver a certain number of megawatts. It is all the community benefits that are being talked about on top, but it is also energy resilience and a cleverer way of using the grid. If we are producing in people's houses, that is taking strain off other parts of the grid. It is vital that they include that. Particularly if they were to be mainstreamed, there is an expectation that the guidance is clear on the expectations from the DNOs, who we have particularly good relationships with but some of our network in UK100 do not.

Can I also quickly answer your supplementary planning document question? We must remember that we can, as a council, only do a supplementary planning document if we have the planning policy to hang



it off. It can only amplify policy. That is where the mainstreamed national guidance is vital and it gives scope for specific bits of localised policy.

The other missing piece is that there is a danger of seeing planning as the barrier here. Actually, it is the money; it is where the money goes. The biggest incentive of course for local people to be involved in local planning would be if they were able to access local electricity at a reduced price. I am sure you have other sessions talking about the need for an electricity market, but in the context, the planning follows the money, and being able to incentivise local people and local authorities with cheaper electricity is the bigger gain.

Q252 **Claire Young:** Can we turn now to public-private initiatives as a way of developing community energy? I will start with Emily. How can financial partnerships between local authorities and the private sector facilitate community energy developments, if indeed you think they can?

Councillor O'Brien: There is good practice across the country. In UK100 we have Bristol, a member, and I am sure it has been mentioned in other settings that it has some good practice in bringing £20 million of private money with the council acting as a broker.

Q253 **Claire Young:** Do you think that is replicable?

Councillor O'Brien: It is quite tricky to mandate that, because it has come out of a specific place. The joy of place-based working and the power of all this stuff we are talking about, with empowering communities, will look different in different places. I think we cannot deliver the target that we are talking about without private sector money, and councils are well placed to bring that in. It is certainly something we have looked at doing in partnership with our local community energy sector. Also, councils are good at getting those people in a room. We have been doing some energy planning at a town level, which has brought in Octopus Energy, Rolls-Royce—big players and potentially big private sector money. That convening power needs to happen at a local level, and it needs to bring in community energy as well so that local people are getting their part of it.

Eleanor Radcliffe: We work with Oldham Council quite closely on the net zero accelerator. The purpose of the net zero accelerator in the project we are working on is to deliver a similar model to Bristol City Leap. In terms of how that is playing out in Oldham in comparison to Bristol, it is useful to know the way that the Community Energy Fund was established within the Bristol model, as a route to supporting the community energy sector more broadly in Bristol, was because Bristol had a strong community energy sector to start with. There was good engagement between the council and the sector, and the sector basically proposed that there was a significant part of the social value delivered by that partnership to support community energy.



The challenge is where these models are being used in places where that sector is not as strong, and creating a way of ensuring that the financial benefits and otherwise that return to the local area are informed by the local area. We are finding that Oldham has two community energy organisations, which are both doing brilliant work but may not be looking to scale in the same way that you would like to boost community energy in that area. So there is discussion at the moment about how the social value element can be shaped by local needs. Whether that lands on community energy is a different question, because it depends on what is decided by the local area and who is pushing for what.

A significant thing to do—and this speaks to the question a lot earlier about reform—is to frame this making sure that it is understood that community energy delivers local wealth, good health and social benefits, it brings communities together, and there is an element of social cohesion. A lot of the time that is not necessarily understood within the wider VCSE sector as a factor and as something that could bring benefits to local places that may be struggling.

From our perspective, when it comes to public-private partnerships, I agree that we will not get to where we need to get to without private funding. The question should always be when it comes to the benefits that are delivered and the potential for community energy, how that speaks to the needs and wants of communities in the area and what the processes are to ensure that that is built into the types of procurement exercises that are happening.

Q254 Claire Young: Do you think if there was greater collaboration between local authorities and the DNOs, that would make it easier for the social value to be recognised in the planning process, or does that have to happen through change in the planning process?

Councillor O'Brien: I am slightly worried that I am the councillor talking about the planning process, and you need to get the real planners in. They are separate things. The planning process sits slightly separate from those things, and there is always a perception that we can just make changes in our local planning process, which does not follow through.

There is a point about the role of DNOs, as we have talked about the role of GB Energy as well. If that is working well, it should be doing what we are seeing working successfully in our local area. Our officers in Lewes District Council have worked with UK power networks to make a platform available so that people can explore the capacity and the gaps, and I think that should be happening. It should be a supportive relationship and, if necessary, it should be mandated that the DNOs engage with their local areas. The feedback from our wider network is that is not always happening, and that is a massive missing piece. That needs to happen in all of our futures.

Tanuja Pandit: I have a slightly different take on it. We have seen a lot of public-private partnerships in the work that Power Up North London



does. This is about funding and technical know-how, and we have seen both of those happen in our various projects. It is about inviting self-interest on the part of private organisations. A lot of their employees, as I mentioned before, love to contribute to our front-line projects. They see a lot of personal benefit and professional benefit from doing it, and their employers recognise it too. There is more scope for those sorts of partnerships to develop and grow in the coming years.

Q255 Ms Polly Billington: I do not expect you to know specifically the answer to this, but it is worthwhile just putting it on the record. Do we know how much community benefit in gigawatts is already in development, conceptually? Tanuja, you mentioned the 1 GW of solar planned across your part of north London. Does anybody have an idea about how much potential there is already in the system—people thinking about it, or whatever?

Councillor O'Brien: I don't. I have to defer to Community Energy England on that. I have figures for Bristol, but that is localised.

Tanuja Pandit: Mine was across London, Polly, not just north London.

Q256 Ms Polly Billington: Yours is 1 GW across London just for solar.

Tanuja Pandit: Across London.

Q257 Ms Polly Billington: I am making a back-of-a-fag packet point, but it still stands. We had NESO in the other day. It does not take any responsibility for the 8 GW target, so my concern that is no one is taking responsibility. National Grid did not take any responsibility for it either. The distribution network operators do not take any responsibility for it. If you are going to take responsibility for your 1 GW here and 5 MW here, or whatever, nobody is adding up those on the back of a fag packet and saying, "Right, do your 1 GW". Whose responsibility is it to get that 1 GW done and whose responsibility is it to map the 8 GW and say—sorry, I will go back to my point. Local area energy planning should say to Lewes District Council, "Right, you have got your heat map, you have got your solar map, you have got your wind map, you have got your grid and you have got a DNO that is very friendly and happy. What are you going to do with it?"

Councillor O'Brien: Do you want me to answer on that?

Ms Polly Billington: I would love you all to answer on that.

Councillor O'Brien: Start answering that, I should say. To come back to the Bristol figures, which obviously represent one small place: across the EV charging network, council operational buildings, schools, social housing stock, heat network expansion, and large-scale renewable development, which is an £83 million programme, collectively these initiatives are expected to result in the impressive reduction of approximately 140,000 tonnes of carbon emissions and the installation of



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182 MW of clean renewable energy over the five years. That is an example of somewhere doing that scale.

Q258 **Ms Polly Billington:** It is interesting that there are other benefits apart from the generation of the energy that is factored in. Of course, that is not including a metric for Clean Power 2030; should it be?

Councillor O'Brien: I am answering in my capacity as a councillor here. This is not something that I have had with the network, but we can ask and follow up on that. Personally, I am wary of Government taking a map and saying—we have seen this not always working out well with things like housing targets that are quite difficult. If you mandate an area to deliver a certain amount and there is not the grid capacity or the capacity in people power, whether it is community energy or council or whatever, there is a danger—

Q259 **Ms Polly Billington:** That would be a problem if you just gave it to the energy nerds, for example, who do not think about how many people there are, or you forgot to factor in the grid capacity, but grid capacity is pretty crucial for a local area energy plan, isn't it?

Councillor O'Brien: Yes. The way to go, though, is to empower local areas to be able to deliver on that. I appreciate that is not neat and you are saying, "How do we know it will add up?" but I think you will have to trust us on that. There is a huge amount of untapped energy. We have all heard from our colleagues in community energy endlessly about the attempts they have made and then the barriers they face.

Q260 **Ms Polly Billington:** Let's go on to the barriers. How long does it normally take to get a community energy project online?

Eleanor Radcliffe: How long is a piece of string? It takes a long time.

Q261 **Ms Polly Billington:** It is 12 November 2025, so we have less than five years to get 8 GW of community energy power on to the system. What is your honest assessment of our prospects of being able to do that under the current system?

Councillor O'Brien: Shall I start? I am ever the optimist. I think if we take away some of the barriers—

Q262 **Ms Polly Billington:** Which are the barriers you would take away?

Councillor O'Brien: There is the national planning one.

Q263 **Ms Polly Billington:** That is the paragraph you mentioned, yes?

Councillor O'Brien: No, it is the wider thing about community energy being a material consideration within the planning system, which would generate a different pathway for assessing community energy differently from very large-scale energy production, which also has its place but differently. You put the money into local authorities to be the convenors and resource them to be able to do some of the support work that we have heard about from our colleagues.



Q264 **Ms Polly Billington:** And do the energy derisking and underwriting projects?

Councillor O'Brien: If you had sources of funding so it does not end up falling back to councils or other people. That will bring in community money as well as private sector money, but they cannot do it in the timescale, so if there was that funding available—also, the technical expertise is a barrier. We have ended up funding technical expertise.

Q265 **Ms Polly Billington:** That could also be GB Energy, couldn't it?

Councillor O'Brien: That could also be GB Energy, yes. It has to be good, doesn't it? I am not being rude about GB Energy—

Q266 **Ms Polly Billington:** You are not going to get it from DNOs?

Councillor O'Brien: The DNOs as well. They have a really key role, if they share their data.

Q267 **Ms Polly Billington:** Do you need to obligate them to do things?

Councillor O'Brien: I am not going to answer that, because I am speaking for UK100 and we do not have a line on that. If I speak as a councillor, I think that should be obligated, and I was quite shocked to hear that some of the DNOs were not engaging on this agenda.

Q268 **Ms Polly Billington:** What is already changing? What are you seeing that this Government are doing? Bearing in mind they have made a target of 8 GW and have the Clean Power 2030 target, what do you already see changing that is making your life easier to contribute to that 8 GW?

Tanuja Pandit: Some of the planning requirements for air source heat pumps, for example, have been relaxed, which is helpful but there are still ways to go. For domestic and non-domestic air source heat pumps—of which we want to install millions, and we have done only 250,000—the issue is we want them to be part of permitted development rather than have so many constraints on them. Without that, it is a huge challenge. We are also saying that climate and provision of clean energy are not a statutory duty for councils and, therefore, they do not allocate appropriate resources because resources go elsewhere.

We have mentioned the hurdles in the planning process. There is a lack of consistency across different parts of London, speaking specifically for our area, and that results in huge frustration for community energy groups in projects being set back or refused in one borough versus another. That is quite a challenge for us and not something that we can overcome off our own bat.

Q269 **Ms Polly Billington:** Forgive me; I will ask one last question on that. Community energy advocates spend quite a lot of time saying, "We are all unique and special and different" and then, funnily enough, want something big and co-ordinated that is consistent for everybody, "and we



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want to achieve 8 GW, but we don't want to be told to do it". I think there needs to be some movement here from the community energy sector to say, "We will do the 8 GW. We need these things to be able to do it, but we will be more consistent, more strategic and do it on a bigger scale or whatever to be able to get there." If we keep going on about it being 1 MW or whatever, we are not going to be able to get there and we will still spend all our time saying, "We are all special and unique", which frankly is not really the way forward, is it?

Tanuja Pandit: I am not making the point about us being special or unique. The point I am making is that the rules around planning make it difficult to deliver these huge targets. If we simplify them, if we make air source heat pumps for domestic and non-domestic buildings permitted development, if we simplify the permitted development rules around solar, if we make things easier and people understand what they are required to do, they can dedicate themselves and get it done.

I am also not saying that all these huge targets can be delivered just by community energy. We are saying community energy has a key role to play but they are not the sole contributors. All of us need to play our part. There are many stakeholders involved here.

Councillor O'Brien: Can I come in on that? There is an important point that as local authorities we are not averse to things being put on us, and we are good at stepping up in partnership with our community energy sector. I want to echo the point made about the importance of a statutory duty with the powers and resources that are needed to deliver on local authorities, without having to put a numerical target, which is difficult. I do not like targets by algorithm because an algorithm can never take everything into account, but it would put an obligation on meeting local needs, which I think would be quite game changing.

The community energy sector has been established for 18 years where I live. It started out in 2009 with the Harvey's Brewery, a kind of community-owned share issue, and they are now looking at a 14 MW solar farm, which would supply the energy needs for most of our district. To make that step change, it is important to have the kind of resourcing that goes on, but I do not think a numerical target will always be right unless it is a really special one, because if it is by algorithm I think it will not work. That does not mean there cannot be the obligation around our own local areas, which I think many of us would welcome.

Q270 **Mike Reader:** Eleanor, did you say your project is not currently generating? When did you start working on the project? It says here that you started working with communities in 2020. Is that the project you are talking about?

Eleanor Radcliffe: The community-led energy planning project is not a generating project. It is focused on embedding community-led energy planning as a process, as a methodology.



Q271 **Mike Reader:** Will you be generating at some point, or is it just a planning project?

Eleanor Radcliffe: We are working with the communities to basically identify prospects of community energy projects, but what came out of the original Oldham energy futures project was two community projects, one of which was focused on energy and advice and basically supporting energy efficiency, and the other was focused on local transport, because they were felt to be the priorities for those areas.

Q272 **Mike Reader:** I am just trying to understand. Do you have any projects that will be generating in your plan?

Eleanor Radcliffe: We are working with the communities to identify projects. As Carbon Co-op, we do not have generation projects currently. We are working to support others to identify projects.

Chair: Thank you very much. That brings us to the end of the session. Thank you very much for your evidence and the recommendations that you have given. There were quite a lot. You have all promised to write to us further to pick up the areas where you did not have the information with you. That will be much appreciated. If there are additional recommendations, please put those in writing to us. That is the end of the first panel. We will suspend the session while we change over. Thank you all very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Robbie Calvert, Dan Stone and Jenny Wigley KC.

Q273 **Chair:** Welcome back to this afternoon's Energy Security and Net Zero Select Committee and our session on how we scale up community energy. Our second panel on reforming the planning system is very welcome. As with the first panel, I will ask you to introduce yourselves and then we will go into questions, starting with Polly Billington.

Jenny Wigley: Good afternoon, everyone. I am a planning barrister at Landmark Chambers. I acted for Resilient Energy Severndale, which was the community energy operator in the Supreme Court case in Wright that considered the materiality of considerations relating to community energy.

Dan Stone: I am from the Centre for Sustainable Energy, which is a sustainable energy charity. I am a chartered town planner. I used to work in local planning authorities but now I am our policy and influencing officer.

Robbie Calvert: I am the head of policy and public affairs at the RTPi. I am also a chartered planner with a background in the public sector.

Chair: Thank you very much. You are all very welcome.



Q274 **Ms Polly Billington:** I know that you were all present at the previous session. Bearing in mind what evidence we heard then, what prospects do you think we have of achieving the 8 GW of community energy by 2030?

Robbie Calvert: There are three key things here. It is providing that national clarity, and we can unpack that a little bit further, the capacity issue that was raised by the previous panel, and there is a skills one as well. I know that the previous panel was discussing supplementary planning documents and how we better align local area energy plans with local plans. We need to consider in England at least the extremely low coverage of adopted local plans at the moment.

Our research with Regen, which we submitted as part of our written evidence, has shown this disconnect between energy and spatial planning and a variance in how these local area energy plans engage communities across the country. We need to look at ways to start resourcing local plan teams to bring forward this work so we can achieve this in a plan-led manner.

We will be publishing our “State of the Profession” report next Monday. That has shown a 28.8% real-terms cut in planning policy teams since 2010, which I think is integral to this issue of low local plan coverage. We do await the revision of the local plan system and the national decision-making policies. Some of these issues can be addressed through that, but fundamentally we need to deal with this capacity issue. Ahead of the Budget we are asking the Government to return funding levels back to 2010 for planning policy teams.

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill has a provision in it to ringfence fees, but that is targeted quite directly at development management teams. We need to cover planning policy teams if we are to address this in a measured way.

Skills is a big issue as well. The MHCLG skills and capacity survey identified 45% of planning departments in England reporting a skills gap around energy and climate change, like our membership survey, which identified a similar reporting skills gap in that area. I will stop there but we can come back.

Dan Stone: The thing I want to get on to is talking about the pipeline. Now, community energy is still perceived as quite a middle-class sector, really. It needs to be much wider than that to reach that 8 GW.

Q275 **Ms Polly Billington:** Forgive me, Dan; we are talking about November 2025. We have Clean Power 2030, 8 GW. Normally, I am the biggest social justice warrior on this panel— I know I have competition, and I am pleased that Lizzi is here to fight that corner as a new member—and I am very keen to make sure that this is something that is available to everybody. The point is that this might be speed over breadth of engagement and involvement. What would you do for us to be able to



achieve that 8 GW in the most socially just way possible?

Dan Stone: I would have a nationwide community energy service. You see around the country where things are happening—where there are community energy forums, such as Bristol Energy Network—you have activity but it is very patchy. The support services are very patchy around the country. There are already those services in Wales and Scotland, but we do not have anything in England.

Q276 **Ms Polly Billington:** Can I just follow up? Bearing in mind that we have NESO, which is a national body; we have National Grid, which is a privately owned but national body; and we have distribution network operators across the country whose job it is to keep those wires going—I could go on—what are the responsibilities of those organisations to ensure that we achieve that 8 GW of community energy? How can they enable local authorities and community groups, regardless of their class and demographic for the moment, to achieve that 8 GW?

Dan Stone: I think that DNOs and local authorities should be considering community energy in local area energy planning, as has been discussed.

Q277 **Ms Polly Billington:** Do we need to change the rules?

Dan Stone: I do not know whether it is so much the rules as the approach to community engagement. It is quite a technocratic process, local area energy plans, and it needs to involve those stakeholders as well to take them into account.

Ms Polly Billington: Telling people who are interested in energy to spend more time talking to people—I would suggest it might be better to change a rule rather than to try to change people's personalities.

Dan Stone: Fair enough. Then the same with NESO, because you have the regional energy spatial plans. Again, that needs to consider the community energy sector and those stakeholders so that we are planning for it. We also need to prioritise community energy projects for getting grid connections.

Q278 **Mike Reader:** I am just going to jump in. Robbie, you mentioned local plans there. I want to focus specifically on the layering of plans here in planning. We have local government reorganisation, which will happen in the next few years, which I understand means that local plans will have to be redone within the new unitary council boundaries. Is that local government reorganisation going to create disruption that stops community energy going forward?

Robbie Calvert: The housing Minister has been clear that authorities should continue planning, regardless of local government reorganisation. Undoubtedly, there will be an awkward transition period for certain areas. We have voiced concerns around the devolution agenda. We do not want to see some areas fall behind in their capability to reorganise and then drive that regional benefit that we want to see.



We have been asking for a national spatial framework, and we will continue to ask for that. That should set the context. That should align the strategic spatial energy plans alongside the land use framework and the industrial strategy, which has some important stuff within it. The next emerging industrial strategy will set out national spatial priorities, which we see very much as a sub-ask of this national spatial framework.

Q279 Mike Reader: Just help me here. Let's say an area is on the pilot scheme for devolution. Hampshire is one, isn't it? Hampshire and the Solent, or whatever it is called. I sat on the devolution Bill, and you would not believe how long we discussed whether the area is Hampshire and the Solent or Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. They have to restructure. They will have to be in unitaries. Those unitaries must do a new local plan. Does that stop them doing community energy? Is there a layering that you must have a local plan to be able to do community energy schemes, or can you do it without the local plan?

Robbie Calvert: You can produce your local area energy plan and that can—

Mike Reader: Would a new unitary have to create a local area energy plan?

Robbie Calvert: Yes, but it could use existing ones as well.

Q280 Mike Reader: Is that a lengthy process?

Robbie Calvert: It depends on the area and whether there are existing local area energy plans already, or where they are at in the cycle of local plan preparation.

Q281 Mike Reader: I can speak for an area that has gone through reorganisation. It took two or three years for the council to re-establish after it was bankrupted in 2021. Could that cause a bit of a delay in certain areas where we have reorganisation?

Robbie Calvert: Potentially, yes.

Jenny Wigley: If I could just come in there, there is potentially a legal impediment to this in relation to planning. If you have a local plan policy, that helps, but the precursor to that is whether community energy itself and the definition of community energy is capable of being a material planning consideration at all. If it is not capable of being a material planning consideration as a matter of law, it is not something that can be included in local plans or SPDs and it is not something that can be taken into account lawfully in the determination of a planning application. That was the problem in the case that I mentioned. An aspect of community ownership, which was a donation to a community benefit fund, was considered by the local planning authority in granting planning permission. That was held all the way up to the Supreme Court to be unlawful and the planning permission was quashed.



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What is difficult, I think, is understanding and—well, it is going to need a change in the law to enable community energy, per se, to be a material planning consideration. There are aspects of it that can be, like providing local employment, having visitors come in to see the benefits of community energy or potentially providing community energy direct to the local community in the grid. In terms of providing community ownership and shares, it is a moot point whether that is lawfully capable of being a material planning consideration.

Q282 Mike Reader: You say there must be change in the law. Is that a quick process or is that something that must go through a lengthy process?

Jenny Wigley: It is primary legislation.

Mike Reader: Yes, it would need primary legislation, so we are not talking about an overnight thing. It may take a couple of years.

Jenny Wigley: Yes.

Mike Reader: It is not in this term of Parliament.

Jenny Wigley: The position at the moment is that the NPPF, which is the national planning policy framework, does specifically reference community-led energy projects. Then community led is defined in the glossary to the NPPF by reference to ownership, public ownership and community benefit to societies. The only encouragement given at the moment is saying you should take account of small-scale and community-led energy and recognise it as a contribution. It does not give any great positive weight to it. Of course, you could change that by changing the policy, which would be relatively quick. Policy can change the weight you are according to material planning considerations.

The difficulty, and the niggle I have at the back of my mind about this, is that material planning considerations must relate to the character of the use of the land and not the identity or purpose of the occupier or the owner, potentially. I think there is a real risk that someone could challenge the application of that policy and say that if you have taken into account the fact that this is owned by the community, and that is a real feature that you have taken into account in your planning determination—irrespective of a donation, which obviously was the case in Wright, but just the ownership per se—and that will be found by the courts not to be a material planning consideration.

Q283 Chair: Thank you. You have started to explain in quite a lot of detail what happened with Resilient. Was it the fact it was community energy on its own, or was it the fact that there was a donation involved?

Jenny Wigley: The focus of the case was the donation. It was a donation of 4% of the turnover to a local community fund. That community fund was available to provide money to all sorts of community projects that were unrelated to the development—for example, OAP lunches or the preschool or other things like that.



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That was the focus of it, but the argument that we were trying to put forward, and obviously we were unsuccessful, was that that community fund was an inevitable and natural aspect of the community ownership. That was the way in which the society was demonstrating its commitment and stake to the community. We were saying that because of that, it was really all connected to the policy encouragement for community-led development, and the law should be dynamic enough to allow that to be considered. We had a very clear no in relation to that—certainly in relation to the fund—but it did not go as far as directly addressing the community ownership aspect per se. That is why it is still a bit of a moot point.

Q284 **Chair:** My understanding is that there are other community energy projects where community benefits are paid locally. Why have they been allowed but this one was not?

Jenny Wigley: It is not that it is unlawful to do that. It is that it is unlawful to take it into account as a material consideration when you are granting planning permission. It is perfectly lawful. It was encouraged by DECC policy in 2014, or whenever it was, and it is a perfectly lawful thing for anyone to do. It is just that it cannot influence the planning decision.

Chair: A law change would be to make it a relevant—

Jenny Wigley: I would suggest that it would be to change section 70 of the Town and Country Planning Act. For example, a similar change was made some years ago to make the Welsh language considerations a material planning consideration.

Q285 **Chair:** If it changed in England, would it influence similar changes in Wales and Scotland? Would it need to?

Jenny Wigley: I would need to check how much of that aspect would be a devolved matter.

Chair: Perhaps you can come back to us.

Jenny Wigley: Yes.

Q286 **Chair:** This would make the planning process easier for community energy groups, presumably?

Jenny Wigley: Yes. Obviously, it all depends on how it is defined, but if effectively you were referencing the community ownership model in a robust way and saying that a development coming forward should be capable of being accorded positive weight, then those developments would have a leg up in getting planning permission.

Q287 **Chair:** Robbie, what is your view?

Robbie Calvert: At the RTPi we would agree that there needs to be a review of the Newbury principles. It is one that needs to be dealt with in legislation. We would support community benefit as a material consideration.



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Q288 **Chair:** Explain the Newbury principles for us.

Robbie Calvert: It is a test from a case in 1981 or something along those lines. It is around the actual development—do you want to come in, Jenny?

Jenny Wigley: It might be easier. It is the test of what is a material planning consideration as a matter of law. It is twofold for these purposes. First, it must be for a planning purpose, so not for an ulterior purpose. “For a planning purpose” means related to the character of the use of the land and not the particular purpose of the occupier. That is the first test.

The second test is that it must be fairly and reasonably related to the development permitted. In the particular case, it was a planning permission for a change of use of aircraft hangars. The council put on a condition saying “when you have finished using them, you must demolish them”. The court held that that is not a material planning consideration because it is not related to the development. All you are doing is changing the use; you are not putting the building up in the first place. By changing the use, you cannot be required at the end to demolish the building. It is quite—it is a twofold test as to what is a material planning consideration.

Q289 **Chair:** You were going to say it is quite complicated, weren't you? Thank you.

Robbie Calvert: Setting that aside, that is why some of our submission has focused on resourcing and skills here. If we are to deliver planning applications to any development, it is good to look at all the Government's growth agenda quite broadly.

The housing agenda fishes from the same pool of planners who are required to provide permission for renewable energy as well. We must look at this in the round in terms of growth and capacity. An ambitious growth agenda will require a significant amount more planners. Meanwhile our pipeline of planners is shaky. Changes to level 7 apprenticeships, for example, might reduce a substantial number of planners coming into the system. Meanwhile there is a dearth of senior and principal planners in this country, some of which deal with more major renewable applications, for example. We also have a succession issue, I think, especially within local authorities.

We also have an issue around ageing, as we understand. We have a skewed older age profile in local authorities. Over the coming years we could expect a huge amount of expertise to leave our planning authorities as they retire, so we need to develop our younger planners through these senior roles as well. The Government need to look at the pipeline, the intake and the development of our staff into these roles so we can have a system that works as well as it can to bring forward these projects in a timely manner.



Q290 **Chair:** Do you agree with the changes that Jenny suggested?

Robbie Calvert: Yes.

Chair: Yes. Dan?

Dan Stone: Yes. I am not going to disagree with it. I think it would feel very awkward and uncomfortable for the planning system to be considering in any detail the community benefits from a particular scheme and negotiating on those. I agree that it gets us on to a slippery slope. I would like us to be able to consider the fact that an application is from a community energy group and that community energy group has articles of association with what it will spend its money on. It has an asset lock preventing it selling the asset and then going off to the Bahamas. I would like to be able to take that into account in planning decisions. Whether that requires a change in the law I do not know.

Q291 **Chair:** We heard in the first panel about the importance of getting cheaper electricity. How can that be applied as a planning condition?

Dan Stone: It is fundamental. In CSE we have been running these community engagement workshops all about renewable energy. I have lost count of how many we have done now, but you go into a community, you talk about their landscape and then you ask an open question: what proportion of your energy demand could you develop from renewables around you? When you ask a question like that, you get an amazing response. What is clear is that who owns the asset is important in how they see it. We are then turning that into a project development process. From this short list of potential projects, what proportion are deliverable, and can we help you do that? That is what we are talking about with this pipeline.

Robbie Calvert: Around the definition of community benefit, to be clear from our perspective, we do not support incentives that provide financial gains to individuals. We want to see public good derived from that community benefit as well. I just want to make that clear.

Q292 **Chair:** Before I go to Jenny, the Government have stated that they see the desirability of some system, not just on community projects, where those who are hosting infrastructure see financial benefit from doing so. How does that statement or that idea sit with what we are discussing?

Robbie Calvert: In planning terms we have disagreed with that. We want to see the community benefit provide public good, be that environmental or joint ownership arrangements or whatnot. Yes, we have pushed back on that proposal.

Jenny Wigley: I suppose there are two things. The extent to which the wind turbine or the solar farm directly provides the energy to the local community—I do not really know how feasible that is and how easy that is. I expect there are lots of issues about that in terms of connections and things. To the extent that could happen, I think that would be a material



planning consideration because it is physically related to the use of the land. Without changing the law, if you have a wind turbine that provides the local area with direct energy, that would be something that you could consider legitimately. Of course, if that filtered through into either security of supply or lower prices or both, that would be a part of that.

Q293 **Chair:** There are things that can happen already with the existing planning system, without the changes?

Jenny Wigley: Yes, in that respect. The difficulty at the moment, the things that could not happen—very clearly, you cannot take into account community benefit funds that provide money that goes otherwise than to directly mitigating the effect. It could be a fund to put landscaping up around a solar farm, and that would be fine, but funds for wider, more disparate public benefits would not be.

Q294 **Chair:** Presumably, similarly with money off bills, which is to Robbie's point?

Jenny Wigley: Money off bills, per se—I do not think that would be a material planning consideration, no. The moot point comes around whether you can consider the identity and nature of the owner.

Q295 **Ms Polly Billington:** Can I follow up on that? I am interested in the identity and nature of the owner. If it were publicly owned land, for example by the local authority, would that make a difference?

Jenny Wigley: Not in planning terms, no. The fact that the application is on the local planning authority's land—you almost have Chinese walls there about considering the application. The fact that the planning authority is the applicant would not make any difference to the planning considerations.

Q296 **Ms Polly Billington:** I am also interested in the argument that if it is publicly owned land, it should be used for public purposes. That is one of the reasons why you build social housing on it and so on. I am just thinking about whether that is a way of having a material consideration that this is publicly owned land, we are not selling it off and we want to create public good out of it, including generating energy for the local area.

Jenny Wigley: No. There are two systems. In the Local Government Act, there is the process for appropriating land to different purposes and for selling off land. You have to get the highest price—those sorts of things. Those govern land ownership by local authorities, and they are entirely separate from the planning considerations. They would not be considered in the planning determination.

Chair: This is bringing back very long-ago memories of sitting on a planning committee being told repeatedly that you can only consider planning matters in the decisions you make.

Jenny Wigley: Yes; apologies for that.



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Chair: It is important that we understand it in the evidence we gather.

Q297 **Claire Young:** I think you have partly answered these questions already. I want to explore a bit further what is appropriate and proportionate in material considerations. As someone else who has been a councillor and knows how quick people can be to jump to the idea that bribes and so forth are a thing, what criteria would you need to have in place to avoid accusations of bribes or buying planning consent?

Jenny Wigley: Obviously, you cannot control how the press view things, but it is really a matter of principle. It is not a matter of degree or a matter of proportionality. It is a matter of principle as to what the fund or the money is provided for. If it is provided to mitigate a planning harm, then that is perfectly legitimate and can be considered. If it is not necessary to make the development acceptable in planning terms, in land use terms, then it is not appropriate to be considered in the planning consideration. It is not really about the perception or the degree or proportionality of the money; it is about the purpose and how it is considered.

Q298 **Claire Young:** I do not know whether you want to add anything to that.

Robbie Calvert: I agree with everything just said.

Chair: We do not need to continue, then. The only reason I am saying that is because the Minister is speaking, so we have very little time left and we must go on.

Q299 **Ms Polly Billington:** Dan, what do you think needs to change in the rules to enable local stakeholders to meet this target?

Dan Stone: Banging the same old drum about normalising community energy, DNOs having much more of an open door with community energy groups to get their grid connections, prioritising community energy grid connections in the queue so they go through—

Ms Polly Billington: Those are things that NESO and the DNOs must do.

Dan Stone: Yes.

Q300 **Ms Polly Billington:** Local area energy planning mandated?

Dan Stone: Possibly, yes. Then I would say for local planning authorities, improving the pre-application process between community energy groups and local planning authorities so that any issues come up early and can be addressed early on.

Q301 **Ms Polly Billington:** What do you think are the prospects of the Government hitting their target in four years and two months?

Dan Stone: There are a lot of changes that need to happen for that to take place. I will give you an example of good practice. Bristol City Council—



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Q302 **Mike Reader:** If the changes do not happen, will the Government hit their target?

Dan Stone: Probably not.

Q303 **Torcuil Crichton:** Can I put that question the other way? Your to-do list—who needs to get it done? Who needs to tell these guys to do it?

Dan Stone: I think all those bodies that we are talking about.

Q304 **Torcuil Crichton:** Who do they have to be told by?

Dan Stone: I think there is a culture change. We need a nationwide community energy service. We have thousands of communities writing neighbourhood plans who know nothing about community energy at the moment.

Q305 **Ms Polly Billington:** I am not being funny, Dan, but I did not know what Jenny has just told us about the material consideration. I am a new legislator, but I am a legislator. Not knowing about the system is not that unusual. It is about how much we need to change the system to make it easier and not end up with unintended consequences, which I think is Jenny's point.

Dan Stone: The other thing that we have not really talked about at all—the elephant in the room—is getting a clear access to market for community energy groups. The price of renewables has fallen hugely, yet still only large community energy projects get built. You have the contracts for difference, which provide price stability for large commercial schemes of over 5 MW. There is no mechanism for getting access to the market for smaller schemes, community energy schemes.

Q306 **Ms Polly Billington:** What should change for that to happen?

Dan Stone: You could have a community contracts for difference scheme. The Government would set a strike price. Where the price falls below this point, you get a top-up to bring it back up. When the price is above that strike point, the community pays back.

Q307 **Ms Polly Billington:** I have had a thought, and this is very dangerous in these circumstances. Jenny, if you had a material consideration, I know that you are talking specifically about planning law, but I am also interested in the fact that community energy can increase grid resilience and at the moment that is not factored into the system. If you had a community energy scheme that would materially improve the grid resilience in that place, so it would be material to that place, would that be enough of a material consideration to say we could not put it anywhere else but there in order for it to achieve its goal, which is to increase grid resilience locally, help with demand management, increase flexibility, and so on?

Jenny Wigley: Yes. That is much closer to being a material planning consideration, or it is a material planning consideration. It is just whether the community nature of it is relevant to that. That is the issue. If that



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project is going to increase grid resilience and be efficient, that would all be relevant to be considered in supporting it. It is whether the fact that it is promoted by the community is relevant.

Chair: Thank you. We will give Torcuil Crichton the time remaining.

Q308 **Torcuil Crichton:** I will try to be quick. First, I am intrigued by this court case, Jenny. When you said 4% of turnover was going to the community, where was the rest of it going?

Jenny Wigley: I do not know. I think it was—

Q309 **Torcuil Crichton:** Was it a private individual?

Jenny Wigley: It was turnover, you see.

Torcuil Crichton: It was not a private—

Jenny Wigley: I think it was a private-public partnership. It is important to note, though, that the court did take that into account but said even if it were not, this would be the position. So, it was not that aspect of it that stopped it from being a material consideration.

Torcuil Crichton: It just strikes me that 4% is peanuts—

Jenny Wigley: Well, it was a lot of money. I think it was £600,000; I do not know. It was a lot of money. It wasn't nothing; it was substantial.

Q310 **Torcuil Crichton:** What we lack is this derogation of status for community energy in the planning process, and we lack a definition of community energy as well.

Jenny Wigley: As I said, there is a definition in the NPPF of what community led is, and that applies not just to energy, but to affordable housing or bringing forward housing. That is directly referenced to the ownership. It is community-led development, development taken forward by or with a not-for-profit organisation that is primarily for the purpose of meeting the needs of its members or the wider local community rather than being a primarily commercial enterprise.

Organisations should be created and managed democratically and controlled by their members. Then there are various legal forms. Benefits of the development to the community should be clearly defined and consideration given to how those benefits can be protected over time. That is already in policy.

Q311 **Torcuil Crichton:** I did not know that was there either.

Jenny Wigley: It is. It is in the NPPF.

Torcuil Crichton: We have been groping for weeks for a definition of community energy.

Chair: We have asked that question to every panel, and finally we have a



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definition.

Ms Polly Billington: It is a win for this afternoon.

Jenny Wigley: That is in the planning policy, but the worry is: can you really apply it in planning?

Q312 **Torcuil Crichton:** Of course, in the civil service community, when you talk about community energy it is: what is community and what is not community.

Jenny Wigley: That is not just energy. That is community led, but then the community-led bit is referenced.

Q313 **Torcuil Crichton:** Very good. That is one definition of community energy. Then you have your community energy group, which is only 4%. I would not define that as community led—

Jenny Wigley: Well, it was.

Q314 **Torcuil Crichton:** Do we need different levels?

Jenny Wigley: It was other benefits as well. The 4% of turnover, I do not know, but I presume there is a high capital cost in the first place in setting these things up.

Q315 **Torcuil Crichton:** To get to where we want to get—getting community energy as a material consideration in planning—should things like a wholly owned community energy scheme be ahead of one that is only 4% or one that is 20%?

Dan Stone: That would seem reasonable to me, yes. It is capable of being a material consideration, and it would be for the local planning authority to consider what weight it would give to that, if you have a shared scheme, and I suppose the degree to which it was a local community energy organisation that is supported by its constituents or local membership.

Q316 **Torcuil Crichton:** Robbie, what if that community energy project was the municipality that is dealing with the planning?

Robbie Calvert: I think in the previous panel there was reference to a flowchart relating to the permitted development rights for solar. I could imagine several flowcharts now for a planning authority trying to determine what is appropriate and what is proportionate in terms of community benefit, or what community ownership is. My plea would be that if we are to design a different approach and system, it is one that is straightforward for development management planners to apply.

Q317 **Torcuil Crichton:** For example, my local authority is planning to take a 20% stake in commercial wind farms that it would be the planning authority over. There is a loop there.



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Robbie Calvert: Yes, but it would be dealt with separately in different departments within the local authority.

Torcuil Crichton: Even though the local authorities have material benefits from the planning. It is difficult, but that is why we are here.

Chair: Thank you all very much. We will finish there. Thank you for your very concise and to the point answers and for the recommendations, and especially for the definition.