

Community Engagement

The role of community engagement in the context
of financing place-based net zero

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Community Engagement: Why it Matters in a Place Based Approach to Net Zero

Introduction

This Knowledge Product explains why community engagement matters in a place-based approach to Net Zero, particularly with respect to unlocking finance. The product is for Local and Regional Authorities looking to accelerate their journey to Net Zero with investable projects. Such is the importance of Community Engagement; it is one of the seven fundamental ‘pillars’ underpinning the Local Net Zero Accelerator programme. The others six being: access to finance, organisational, place-based, socio-economic, political and public policy, and planning and procurement.

What is Community Engagement?

“Nothing about us, without us” <anon>

Community Engagement is the process of actively involving communities in shaping decisions that affect community members’ lives and collective wellbeing. It is a way of developing a working relationship between public bodies and community organisations. In a place-based approach to Net Zero, community engagement can be holistic for climate strategy and planning, and it can also be project specific, necessary for a wide range of projects, from large scale solar or wind farms of national significance, to localised domestic retrofit solutions.

Why Community Engagement Matters

Community engagement builds investor confidence by encouraging public support and reducing delivery risk

Investors are wary of projects that face local opposition, delays, or uncertain uptake (e.g. heat networks, solar farms and wind turbines). Effective engagement demonstrates:

- Community buy in, reducing the risk of delays or pushback.
The **3Ci community engagement guide** highlights that engaging communities early helps shape projects that are both “socially supported” and “investible,” making them more attractive to private financiers.
- Alignment with local needs, improving adoption rates and long-term project success.
The **Connected Places Catapult** emphasises that local authorities’ ability to “directly engage with communities” is central to creating net zero initiatives that deliver community benefit and draw in long-term finance.

Investors care because public acceptance means lower delivery risk, and therefore more bankable projects.

Community engagement produces better designed, place-specific projects which can offer commercial returns.

Net zero solutions are not “one size fits all”. Community engagement is critical for shaping place-based solutions, which can bring about:

- Co-benefits and social value

- Cost effective projects
- Attracting investors seeking predictable outcomes

Research from the **Academy of Social Sciences** shows that place specific strategies, shaped by community involvement, deliver greater energy savings, lower investment costs, and deliver larger social benefits compared with national, top down approaches.

Community engagement therefore provides investors with robust local evidence, strong demand signals, and clearly defined local benefits, enabling them to have confidence in the proposition.

Community Engagement demonstrates long term stability and boosts trust, increasing investor confidence

Investors want confidence that:

- Projects will survive political cycles
- There is ongoing local support
- Long-term revenue streams (or behavioural changes) are realistic

Community-endorsed projects show greater resilience over time.

The **3Ci/Connected Places Catapult guide** stresses that community engagement “deepens trust” and strengthens relationships—essential for long-term investment partnerships.

Community Engagement helps unlock enabling ecosystems, partnerships, and aggregated investment models

Community engagement supports:

- Partnerships between councils, community groups, and the private sector
- Aggregated or bundled projects (e.g. across neighbourhoods or districts)
- More efficient use of local knowledge and networks

These elements make investment at scale more feasible.

Regen’s “**Maximising the Value of Local Net Zero Planning**” report notes that robust local partnerships are central to unlocking investment and creating sustainable financing models.

The Cities Commission for Climate Investment (3Ci): 3-Step Guide for Community Engagement

Step 1: Co-Plan

Purpose: Lay the groundwork for inclusive, locally relevant Net Zero projects.

Actions:

- Map stakeholders, including underrepresented groups.
- Form a core team of staff, community members, and partners.
- Analyse local attitudes toward climate and Net Zero.
- Review past engagement efforts and lessons learned.

- Define roles, responsibilities, and timelines.
- Share a co-plan report and invite feedback.

Good Practice:

- Address barriers to participation (e.g. childcare, language).
- Compensate community members fairly.
- Use participatory research to understand local needs.

Case Study: Toynbee Hall used peer researchers to explore energy poverty, resulting in strategic roadmaps for green energy access among low-income groups.

Step 2: Co-Design

Purpose: Collaboratively shape Net Zero interventions with communities.

Actions:

- Host inclusive workshops and pop-up events.
- Design interventions tailored to local context.
- Establish governance structures with community representation.
- Set up delivery groups and agree next steps.

Good Practice:

- Address power dynamics and past mistrust.
- Build on existing community structures.
- Involve local facilitators and experts to bridge capacity gaps.

Case Study: Lambeth Council held a Citizens' Assembly to co-design climate actions, resulting in community-backed recommendations for reducing emissions.

Step 3: Co-Deliver

Purpose: Implement projects with communities as partners.

Actions:

- Finalise delivery plans and secure funding.
- Upskill staff and community members in investment and delivery.
- Ensure maximum uptake and minimal resistance.

Good Practice:

- Embed community governance in project structures.
- Maintain clear communication about what can and cannot change.
- Use pop-up events to reach less-heard voices.

Case Study: Carbon Co-Op Retrofit project in Greater Manchester is a householder-led approach to domestic energy efficiency retrofit market by supporting homeowners with design, contractors, and training.

Ongoing Processes, as recommended by 3Ci are:

Co-Communicate

- Use clear, jargon-free language.
- Leverage community leaders and diverse channels.
- Keep communities informed and involved throughout.

Case Study: Lewisham Speaks - Teatro Vivo's climate project for London Borough of Culture 2022 Lewisham Borough Council commissioned 'Artists of Change' to provide street theatre, performed in every ward (22 locations) and ran workshops for 19 community groups influencing council strategy.

Co-Evaluate

- Co-develop metrics with communities.
- Monitor progress and share lessons learned.
- Embed evaluation throughout the project lifecycle.

Case Study: Impact Investing Institute developed place-based evaluation frameworks to align investment with community outcomes.

Key Takeaways for Local Authorities

- **Community Engagement is not optional:** Poor engagement can undermine even the best technical plans.
- **Start early:** Co-planning sets the tone for trust and collaboration.
- **Resource sufficiently:** effective community engagement is time consuming and therefore costly; ensure adequate budget allocated as part of project costings
- **Different demographics need different approaches:** different techniques are needed for rural and urban areas, deprived and affluent contexts, etc.
- **Be inclusive:** Engage diverse voices, especially those most affected by climate change, and allow more resource for reaching less heard voices, which may be traditionally harder to reach.
- **Share power:** Communities should help shape decisions, not just respond to them.
- **Think long-term:** Build structures that last beyond individual projects or political cycles.

Resources & Support

Toolkits, case studies, and participatory methods via:

- **Cities Commission for Climate Investment (3Ci)** a partnership between Connected Places Catapult, Core Cities UK, London Councils, Key Cities, Scottish Cities Alliance, and other local authorities across the UK aimed at supporting local authorities secure the necessary long-term finance for achieving net zero. including their report **The Path to Net Zero: Three Steps for Effective Community Engagement**
- **Involve:** UK based charity who work to make public participation and deliberation an everyday part of our democracy and help solve the big challenges of our time.
- **Impact Investing Institute:** an independent non-profit organisation dedicated to transforming capital markets to support a fairer, greener and more resilient future

Delivering Net Zero Through Community Participation

Introduction

Local Authorities play a crucial role in achieving Net Zero targets — not only through policy and delivery but by enabling meaningful community participation. Experience from recent initiatives such as Hounslow’s Net Zero Neighbourhood (NZN) programme shows that genuine participation can unlock trust, innovation, and local ownership of climate action.

This paper summarises effective community participation approaches that can help Local Authorities deliver Net Zero outcomes collaboratively and sustainably.

Why Participation Matters

Community participation is more than consultation — it is a process of **partnership, co-design, and shared action**.

When done well, it can:

- Increase **resident awareness and involvement** from initial engagement through delivery.
- **Kick-start neighbourhood transitions**, using local projects as focal points for collective action.
- Build **local skills and capacity**, especially for retrofit and green economy growth.
- Enable **innovative financing** through aggregation of local demand and cooperative investment.
- Create **continuity** across changing policy and funding landscapes.
- Reduce **embodied carbon** through better-informed material and design choices.
- **Maximise co-benefits** by linking retrofit and wider Net Zero pathways (e.g. mobility, energy, health).

These outcomes show that participation isn’t an add-on — it’s a multiplier for local climate impact.

Principles of Effective Participation

Successful participation depends on three interconnected principles:

a. Build and Maintain Trust

- Deliver consistent, transparent communication.
- Be physically present in the community.
- Honour commitments — don’t overpromise.

b. Relevance

- Tailor engagement to the audience and stage of the project.
- Link participation directly to issues that matter locally.

c. Value

- Ensure that participation benefits both the project and the people involved.
- Create opportunities for learning, skills development, and tangible outcomes.

Choosing the Right Participation Approach

Different goals require different engagement methods. The paper outlines four main participation goals:

Goal	Purpose	Participation Approach
Introduce a strategy or plan (e.g. Local Plan, Climate Strategy)	Share information and gather initial feedback	Public meetings, online surveys, awareness campaigns
Host dialogue on key topics (e.g. renewable energy sites, mobility changes)	Understand perspectives, facilitate mutual learning	Roundtables, citizens' assemblies, deliberative forums
Develop/test a project idea (e.g. Net Zero Neighbourhood)	Explore barriers and motivations, test feasibility	Peer research, co-facilitated workshops
Co-design detailed project elements	Jointly develop actions and delivery models	Co-design sessions, participatory budgeting, prototype projects

Case Study: Hounslow Council's Net Zero Neighbourhood Roadmap

Council perspective:

- Feasibility study for a new Net Zero Neighbourhood concept.
- Testing the concept to understand local barriers and motivations.

Participation perspective:

- Building trust between council and residents.
- Developing community skills and leadership capacity.

Approach:

Peer research and co-facilitated workshops enabled residents to shape priorities and identify local retrofit opportunities.

This roadmap demonstrates how early participation can shape viable, community-supported delivery pathways.

Planning for Participation

Participation requires intentional design — not one-off events. Effective planning should:

- Engage **early and iteratively** to influence design and delivery.
- Align with **existing community networks** and local authority programmes.
- Provide **accessible formats** (language support, flexible timings, inclusive spaces).
- Build **feedback loops**, so participants see how their input influences outcomes.
- Be realistic about **resources and deliverability** to avoid overpromising.

Beyond Workshops: Sustaining Engagement

Workshops alone cannot sustain participation. Authorities can deepen engagement by establishing:

- **Community climate clinics** – ongoing advice and dialogue spaces.
- **Neighbourhood transition hubs** – linking retrofit, skills, and finance initiatives.
- **Participatory governance** – resident panels or climate assemblies embedded in delivery.

These ongoing mechanisms maintain trust and ensure continuity through project phases and political cycles.

Key Challenges and Considerations

Balancing community aspirations with financial and technical feasibility

- **Avoiding overpromising** – manage expectations through transparency.
- **Ensuring equitable participation** – reduce barriers related to time, confidence, or cost.
- **Working with translators/interpreters** to include all voices.
- **Building on existing relationships** rather than starting from scratch.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To achieve Net Zero, Local Authorities must move from “doing to” communities to “working with” them. This shift demands investment in participation capacity — both within councils and across neighbourhoods.

Recommendations:

1. Embed participation as a **core element of Net Zero planning**.
2. Develop a **participation roadmap** aligned with project stages.
3. Allocate **resources for sustained engagement**, not just consultation.
4. Foster **local skills, trusted local voices and leadership** to enable community-led delivery.
5. Measure **impact beyond carbon** – track social, economic, and learning outcomes.

Further Reading

- [Community Powered Retrofit for London](#) (London Councils, 2023)
- [Working in Partnership with People and Communities](#) (NHS England, 2022)

Community Engagement: Role of Community Benefit Funds

Introduction

This Knowledge Product examines the role Community Benefit Funds play in Community Engagement for Net Zero projects. The note is for Local and Regional Authorities working on their journey to Net Zero. It is one of a suite of Knowledge Products within the Community Engagement pillar, one of the Seven Pillars of focus areas of the Local Net Zero Accelerator programme.

Community Benefit Funds (CBFs) are an important tool in equitable renewable energy development across the UK. As the energy transition accelerates, Local Authorities have a unique opportunity to shape and steward funds to deliver lasting community value. This paper distils key insights from recent research led by Prof. Matthew Hannon and Foundation Scotland, offering guiding principles and actionable strategies to help Local Authorities maximise the impact of CBFs.

Understanding Community Benefit Funds

CBFs are voluntary financial contributions made by project developers or owners to communities affected by infrastructure projects—most commonly renewable energy developments. These funds are typically governed locally and aim to deliver tangible benefits such as:

- Annual financial payments
- In-kind contributions (e.g. shared ownership, infrastructure access)
- Support for local services, amenities, and capacity-building

CBFs are often formalised through Community Benefit Agreements and scaled to reflect the size and impact of the associated project.

The Growth of CBFs in the UK

The expansion of renewable energy has led to a surge in CBF activity:

- In 2024, Scottish communities received £30.7 million across 283 projects.
- The value of new CBF packages grew eightfold between 2010 and 2017.
- Despite a dip in 2020 (likely due to COVID-19), CBFs have rebounded strongly.

This growth is expected to continue, with CBFs expanding into offshore wind, transmission infrastructure, and natural capital initiatives.

Why Local Authorities Should Engage

Local Authorities are pivotal in ensuring CBFs deliver meaningful, inclusive, and strategic benefits. Key reasons to engage include:

- **Place-based equity:** Ensuring communities co-located with infrastructure are not left behind.
- **Strategic alignment:** Leveraging CBFs to support local development plans and net-zero strategies.

- **Governance support:** Helping communities navigate fund management, accountability, and long-term planning.

Guiding Principles and Actions (GPAs)

Research by Strathclyde University identifies four stages in the CBF lifecycle—Initiation, Design, Operation, and Evaluation—each supported by guiding principles and 13 actionable recommendations. These include:

- **Inclusive design:** Engaging diverse community voices early.
- **Transparent governance:** Establishing clear decision-making structures.
- **Strategic investment:** Aligning fund use with long-term community goals.
- **Ongoing evaluation:** Tracking impact and adapting over time.

Each action is accompanied by rationale, barriers, and solutions, making the GPAs a practical toolkit for Local Authority officers.

Key Challenges and Opportunities

- **Shared ownership remains rare:** Only 3.5% of CBFs offer communities a stake in project assets.
- **Inflation-adjusted payments lag behind recommendations:** Communities could be receiving significantly more if payments were indexed.
- **Strategic coordination is needed:** There's growing interest in cross-governmental models to pool and direct CBF resources more effectively.

Next Steps for Local Authorities

Local Authorities can play a proactive role by:

- Reviewing and applying the GPAs in local CBF engagements.
- Supporting community capacity-building for fund governance.
- Advocating for updated national guidance and inflation-linked payment standards.
- Exploring partnerships with organisations like Foundation Scotland.

Further Resources

- Full report: [Guiding Principles and Actions for Enhancing Community Benefits from Community Benefit Funds](#)
- Podcast episode: [Local Zero – Community Benefit Funds](#)
- Contact: sbs-sisc@strath.ac.uk

Community Engagement in the Rural Context

Introduction

This Knowledge Product explores community engagement in the rural context for Net Zero projects, providing examples from both deprived and affluent communities. The note is for Local and Regional Authorities working on their journey to Net Zero. It is one of a suite of Knowledge Products within the Community Engagement pillar, one of the Seven Pillars of focus areas of the Local Net Zero Accelerator programme.

Rural communities are central to the UK's Net Zero ambitions, yet they face distinct challenges that require tailored engagement strategies. This paper draws on insights from the Rural Design Centre's recent session to explore the barriers, opportunities, and practical approaches for Local Authority Officers working in rural contexts.

Understanding the Rural Context

Rural areas are not homogenous. They vary widely in geography, demographics, infrastructure, and community dynamics. However, several common challenges persist:

- **Geographic isolation** and limited grid infrastructure
- **Access to finance** and technical expertise
- **Human capacity constraints** for project delivery
- **Demographic shifts**, including aging populations and youth outmigration
- **Political and financial case difficulties** due to smaller scale and fewer voters

These factors can hinder the development and delivery of community energy and Net Zero projects.

Community Dynamics and Cultural Considerations

Effective engagement must be rooted in an understanding of rural social structures:

- **Trust and informal networks** are vital; word-of-mouth often outweighs formal communication.
- **Local champions** play a pivotal role in mobilising support.
- **Cultural values** may include scepticism of outsiders and resistance to perceived “urban” or “woke” green agendas.

Rural communities need to be approached by external organisations with humility, respect, and a willingness to listen.

Barriers to Engagement

Key barriers include:

- **Volunteer fatigue** and reliance on older community members
- **Governance gaps** in community-led projects
- **Unequal access** to skills and resources
- **Communication challenges**, especially around technical language and abstract concepts

These barriers can stall promising initiatives and widen inequalities.

Strategies for Effective Engagement

The Rural Design Centre advocates a **design-led, human-centred approach**. Key strategies include:

- **Building Trust and Credibility**
 - Partner with existing groups (e.g., farmers' unions, schools, churches)
 - Work through trusted intermediaries like Local Community Infrastructure Organisations
- **Participation Methods**
 - Use the **Double Diamond framework** to explore and define problems collaboratively
 - Employ methods such as town halls, design challenges, and “planning for real” exercises
- **Communication Approaches**
 - Use **plain language, visual tools, and local stories**
 - Emphasise **peer-to-peer learning** and **economic benefits** alongside environmental ones
- **Inclusivity**
 - Proactively engage **women, youth, and low-income households**
 - Ensure accessibility in timing, location, and format of engagement activities

Role of Local Authority Officers

Local Authority Officers are more than regulators—they are **enablers** of community transformation. Their roles include:

- Providing **technical support**, information, and connections
- Facilitating **partnerships** with NGOs, universities, and businesses
- Leveraging **funding streams** and guiding communities through feasibility to delivery
- Using **policy levers** such as planning support and procurement incentives

Case Studies

- **Humshaugh Net Zero CIC**: community-led initiative demonstrating leadership, persistence, and local ownership
- **Northumberland Community Energy**: successfully installing solar PV and battery installations in community buildings, started small and rolling out
- **Teesdale EV Pilot**: a feasibility study for rural EV charging infrastructure
- **Farming in a Changing Climate (Northumberland)**: farmer-centric engagement using pop-up clinics and tailored communication, and built strong trust and partnerships with previously disengaged audiences
- **Regional Community Energy Company (RCEC)**: scalable model to co-develop and manage community energy projects, address technical, financial, and governance barriers, and ensures equitable access and long-term sustainability

Conclusion

Community engagement in rural areas is complex but essential. With the right strategies, Local Authority Officers can unlock the potential of rural communities to lead in the Net Zero transition. By building trust, fostering collaboration, and enabling local leadership, we can ensure that no community is left behind.

Digital Community Engagement for Place-Based Net Zero in Rural Settings

Introduction

This advice note provides guidance for local authority officers on delivering effective community engagement for place-based Net Zero projects in rural areas, with a focus on digital methods. It draws on insights from the Impact Investing Institute's 'Fostering Impact' guide and highlights practical tools, platforms, and strategies to ensure inclusive, meaningful engagement in rural contexts.

Why Digital Engagement Matters in Rural Areas

Digital engagement can overcome geographic barriers, reach dispersed populations, and provide scalable ways to gather input. However, rural areas may face challenges such as poor connectivity, low digital literacy, and limited access to devices. Local authorities must balance digital and in-person methods to ensure inclusivity.

Recommended Digital Engagement Methods

Virtual Town Halls

Use platforms that support large-scale participation with breakout rooms and real-time feedback tools. Ideal for gathering broad input.

Digital Platforms

- Built-ID (Give My View): Interactive surveys tailored to local contexts.
- Commonplace: Uses social media to promote engagement and gather feedback.
- Hello Lamp Post: QR code-based text chat on street objects for anytime engagement.
- Polis: Real-time opinion gathering using machine learning.

Digital Exhibitions

Allow residents to explore consultation materials online, increasing accessibility for those with mobility or time constraints.

Crowdsourcing

Collect ideas or feedback from a broad audience online. Useful for identifying community priorities.

Distributed Dialogue

Provide event packs to community groups to run their own engagement sessions. Enables decentralised participation.

Best Practices for Rural Digital Engagement

- Combine digital and in-person methods to maximise reach.
- Use plain language and translate materials where needed.
- Ensure accessibility: consider digital literacy, device access, and connectivity.
- Close the feedback loop: report back to communities on how their input influenced decisions.

- Engage diverse voices: use targeted outreach to include underrepresented groups.

Benefits of Digital Engagement for Net Zero

- Reaches wider audiences, including those unable to attend in-person events.
- Enables real-time feedback and data collection.
- Builds transparency and trust in Net Zero initiatives.
- Supports inclusive decision-making and community ownership.

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