How Your Council Works:

A Guide for Community Energy Groups

Written by Dr. Rachel Coxcoon of Climate Guide
In partnership with Community Energy Pathways,
UK100 and Community Energy England
Funded by the Greater South East Net Zero Hub

Foreword

We are delighted to launch this Guide to How Councils Work for Community Energy Groups. Developed as a companion to the Guide to Community Solar on Council Assets for local authority Officers and elected Members, this resource is designed specifically for community energy practitioners. While both Guides have been developed in collaboration with local authorities and Community Energy Organisations in London and the South East, we hope they will also be useful in other parts of England.

Community energy helps to ensure that the benefits of the clean energy transition are felt by local people. As councils across England work to meet ambitious climate targets, reduce energy costs and strengthen community resilience, partnerships between local authorities and community energy organisations offer a powerful route to achieving these goals.

Successful partnerships between local authorities and community energy organisations require an understanding of how each sector operates. While the main guide supports councils to navigate the internal strategic, legal, procurement and organisational challenges associated with community solar projects, this companion guide aims to help community energy groups better understand how local authorities work, how decisions are made, and how to engage effectively with the people and processes that shape council decision-making.

Drawing on the experience of local authorities, community energy organisations and sector experts from across London and the South East, it provides practical guidance to help community energy groups build productive relationships with councils, identify opportunities for collaboration, and avoid some of the common barriers that can slow progress.

We would like to thank Community Energy Pathways, UK100, Community Energy England, Dr Rachel Coxcoon of Climate Guide, and the many officers, councillors, community energy practitioners, and sector specialists who contributed their expertise, experience, and insight into the development of this guide. Their collective knowledge has helped create a practical resource rooted in the realities of both local government and community energy delivery.

We hope this guide helps community energy groups engage confidently with local authorities and develop successful partnerships that deliver lasting environmental, social, and economic benefits for local communities.

Greater South East Net Zero Hub Greater South East Net Zero Hub

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The Greater South East Net Zero Hub is a regional, government-funded initiative that works with local authorities, other public sector organisations, and their stakeholders to support the development and financing of local energy projects.

Project Lead: Community Energy Pathways

An award-winning social enterprise that exclusively works to accelerate growth in the community energy sector through building local skills and capacity, unlocking investment, leading innovation and strengthening collaboration between communities, government, local authorities, and industry partners.

Author: Dr Rachel Coxcoon, Climate Guide

A public sector consultancy led by Dr Rachel Coxcoon offering quantitative and qualitative research, strategic climate change support, and training. Rachel specialises in the political and social dimensions of climate policy, with over 20 years of senior leadership experience in local government and the climate sector.

Project Partner: UK100

A network of ambitious councils led by all political parties working together to tackle climate change, helping local leaders overcome challenges and turn innovation into solutions that work everywhere. From cities to villages, they help communities across the UK create thriving places powered by clean energy — with fresh air to breathe, warm homes to live in, and a healthy natural environment.

Project Partner: Community Energy England

The national voice of the community energy sector, representing organisations from across the community, public, and private sectors all working to put people at the heart of energy system transformation. We work with our members to help create a fair and zero-carbon energy system through the growth of community energy.

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This guide assumes you are a member of a Community Energy Organisation, who has either already started engaging with your local authority in the search for a building or piece of land that you can lease for a solar PV array, or you are shortly about to do so.

For many Community Energy Groups, the first port of call is usually somewhere in the environment team – perhaps an Officer with role titles relating to sustainability, climate, or a role that covers community engagement or empowerment. In other cases, you may have been speaking with a particular Elected Member (Councillor). These Officers or Councillors may be extremely enthusiastic about what you are trying to do. They may have come to your meetings, shared information with you, and may have helped you access some seed-funding.

However, Community Energy Groups regularly find that despite having built a strong relationship with a given Officer or Councillor, they still struggle to progress the idea of securing a lease on a site to install a PV array.

This is because the relationships built are often with Officers or Councillors who do not have the sole authority to make the things you need actually happen. It is one of the most common ways in which community energy projects get stuck. The early relationships you have built are usually necessary, but are not always sufficient. There are Politics with a large 'P' and politics with a small 'p' that you will also have to negotiate, and one of the biggest errors you can make is to think of 'The Council' as a homogeneous entity. It is a complex organism with a permanent Officer cadre (like the civil service) and a political life that ebbs and flows around your local election cycles, and from which the ultimate decision-making powers and corporate priorities of the Council flow.

This Guide does three things:

1

It explains the different types of Councils and what assets they own, because getting this wrong at the start can waste a great deal of time.

2

It explains what Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) means for community energy, because at the time of publication (June 2026) a significant number of Councils in England are in the process of being restructured, and you need to know how that affects you.

3

It maps out the Officer and Member roles that actually have the power to make your project happen, and helps you think about how to get in front of them.

2 What kind of Council are you dealing with?

England has a complicated local government structure, and if you have not worked inside it, it is easy to assume that 'The Council' is a single entity. It is not. Depending on where you live, you may have one Council responsible for everything, or two Councils with responsibilities divided between them. There is also a third tier of local government (Town and Parish Councils). If you are based in a large market town then there is a chance that the Town Council itself (effectively your Parish Council) is also a sizeable entity with staff and possibly a fair number of buildings of its own. Understanding the tiers of government and how they are being reorganised matters enormously for a CEG, because it determines who actually owns the buildings you want to put solar panels on. To complicate matters further, certain elected Members may sit on more than one of these authorities, and depending on political control or the roles they have, operate with different levels of influence around community energy.

Single-tier (unitary) Councils

In a unitary council area, one Council is responsible for all local government services and owns the full range of public buildings and land.

This includes offices, leisure centres, car parks, commercial property, and (often a target for Community Energy Groups), maintained schools. Unitary authorities have different naming conventions, which include:

- **Metropolitan Borough Councils**
  (the large urban areas created in 1974, such as Leeds, Barnsley, Blackpool etc).
- **London Boroughs**
  (all London boroughs plus the City of London are unitary authorities, and are unique in having an over-arching body as well; the Greater London Authority).
- **Unitary authorities outside London and the metropolitan areas**
  (Councils such as Cornwall Council, Wiltshire Council, or Bristol City Council, which were created when two-tier structures were merged in their area on a piecemeal basis from the mid-1990's onwards).

A note on Town and Parish Councils

Note that although this type of area is often referred to as 'single-tier', this refers to your principal authority. In reality, there will almost always be a Town Council as well if you are in a small to medium town, or a Parish Council if you are in a rural area. Urban areas are almost always 'unparished', so if you live in a Unitary Council area that is very urban, then that unitary probably really is the only Council covering your community. In most cases Parish Council estates will be very limited, they often own no more than one building. However, do check: some large Town Councils can own all sorts of assets, such as museums, market buildings and Town Halls. As a much smaller Council that is completely rooted in a tightly drawn area (your specific town), they could be a very useful partner. From this point on though, this Guide will not refer to Town or Parish Councils. You can find out more information about them and what they do via via the National Association of Local Councils (NALC).

Two-tier Councils

In a two-tier area, local government responsibilities are split between a larger County Council and a number of smaller District Councils within it. The split of responsibilities matters for Community Energy Groups as follows:

• District Councils

District Councils are responsible for local planning, housing, waste collection, environmental health, and leisure. They own buildings such as offices, leisure centres, car parks, and sometimes significant commercial property. The scale of what a District Council owns varies considerably: a small rural district might own relatively little beyond its own offices, while others own shopping centres, industrial estates, or large leisure complexes.

• County Councils

County Councils are responsible for education, social care, libraries, highways, and waste disposal. They own maintained schools, libraries, county farms and rural land, and often have very large estates indeed.

A note on Schools

Schools are often a target for community energy groups because of their clear links to a given local community, which helps with share offers and general awareness raising. Schools also offer excellent opportunities for education, and 'social norming' the idea of renewables within a local area. However, a common source of confusion is, "who actually owns the school?". There is a confusing array of school types (outlined in the appendix at the end of this document). In a Unitary or County Council area, only certain schools will be owned by that Council. If you have been hoping to build a relationship with your District Council in the hope of getting onto school rooftops, this is not the right Council: District Councils are not education authorities and however enthusiastic, cannot offer you access to the school estate. And even in a Unitary or County Council area, the Council itself will not own all of the schools either – there will be academies and faith schools who have sites that are entirely owned by trusts or corporate entities. Your Unitary/County Council absolutely can provide you with the up-to-date information on who owns what. More information is provided in the Appendix to this document.

3 Is your Council still going to exist in a few years?

A number of Councils in England are currently in the middle of a Government-driven restructuring process driven by the 2024 Devolution White Paper1. This process will, in most affected areas, result in District and County Councils being abolished and replaced with new single-tier unitary authorities. The official name for this process is Local Government Reorganisation, or LGR. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as many parts of England, this process has already concluded and they operate under a single-tier system, though this Guide is predominantly designed for the English context.

What is LGR and why is it happening?

The Government's rationale for LGR is that the two-tier system (district and county Councils covering the same area) creates duplication, slows down decision-making, and makes it unclear to residents who is responsible for what. The Government's ambition is to replace all remaining two-tier areas in England with single-tier Unitary Councils.

Councils in two-tier areas (and some small or failing Unitaries) were invited in February 2025 to submit proposals for how reorganisation should work in their area. Most areas submitted interim proposals in March 2025 and final proposals by the autumn of 2025. The Government is now working through these proposals and making decisions. There are 21 areas of the country working through the process. New unitary authorities are expected to formally come into existence (known as 'Vesting Day') in most affected areas on 1st April 2027 or 2028.

Once new LGR boundaries are approved, elections to the new authority area(s) are held, and those new authorities then operate as the 'Shadow Authority' for one year, to ensure an orderly handover of land, assets and obligations, and to complete staff restructuring. Thus, for one year before Vesting Day, your area will still have its old District/County structure, and the Shadow Authority will operate alongside it. Once the new area boundaries are agreed, a 'Structural Changes Order,' will be issued, after which the Secretary of State may choose to issue a 'Section 24 Direction' such that any decisions over a certain value made by the 'old' Councils during that Shadow year may need his or her consent before they can go ahead. In practice, the Secretary of State usually passes the power to grant that consent to the Cabinet or Executive of the Shadow Authority.

What does this mean in my area?

The LGR process involves existing Councils preparing justified proposals for how they think the area should be reorganised. These were submitted to the Government in two tranches over the last year, and therefore some have already been approved (for example Surrey Council elections for two new Shadow Unitary Authorities for Surrey Councils, East and West, took place in May 2026 to replace all eleven existing Districts and the County Council, from 1st April 2027). Other areas are still in the consultation or planning process.

In some areas, this is a highly contested process with different Councils proposing a range of options that are mutually exclusive. For example, Kent County Council and its twelve District Councils is currently one of the largest two-tier areas in the country. The County Council and District Councils between them have submitted multiple options, ranging from a single unitary covering the entirety of Kent, to a collection of 3, 4 or 5 unitaries covering different parts of the area. The Government intends to make decisions across all remaining areas during 2026, and may not, in the end, accept any of the proposals put forward by the Councils, instead choosing to impose a different structure in some areas.

For most areas, the timetable means shadow elections to the new Unitary Authorities in May 2027, with the new Councils formally taking over on 1 April 2028. You should check the GOV.UK collections page for your specific area at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/local-government-reorganisation-policy-and-programme-updates, which provides rolling updates on the latest proposals from each area, along with decisions and expected timelines.

Once the arrangements for your area have been approved, arrangements will be made for the elections to the new Shadow Authority, which in many cases will happen in May 2027.

Should we wait until LGR is complete before approaching our Council?

This is likely to be inadvisable, for two reasons.

First, Officers in Councils subject to LGR know their organisations are changing. Some of them are actively looking for things they can get done and locked in before the restructuring happens, as those arrangements will automatically transfer to the new authority on Vesting Day as assets transfer to the new authority. Community energy projects that are clearly designed to benefit the Council and the wider area should not present any special concern and are unlikely to be viewed as obligations that the new authority would not wish to take on. Decisions about assets that are to be disposed of will be part of the normal process of preparing for Vesting Day. It may therefore be the case that the future of certain buildings and land is somewhat uncertain, but other sites will have a very clear rationale for remaining in the new authority's asset portfolio, and as long as you are sensible and cognisant of this when liaising with the Council during this period of change, you should still be able to have fruitful conversations.

Second, new Unitary Authorities will have a great deal to do in their first year of operation. They will have new leadership, new Officer structures, and extremely full agendas. A Community Energy Group arriving as an unknown quantity asking for a relationship from scratch during this time of great upheaval will be much lower priority than one that arrives with an existing agreement already in place.

You should be sensitive though, to the fact that local government Officers in general are stretched and often working at capacity. LGR has created significant extra burdens that may mean that even with goodwill on all sides, it is genuinely difficult for your Council to engage. It is not the case, however, that Councils undergoing LGR are not allowed to enter into new contractual arrangements. As described above, once the Structural Changes Order has been issued for your area, there may also be a Section 24 Direction issued that requires contracts over a certain value to secure consent during the Shadowing year. You can check the Government's rolling updates page (see link above) to find out if this is the case. Even if there is a Section 24 Direction, should understand this only as a reasonable consent process that is well designed to protect new authorities from being saddled with onerous obligations; it may therefore add some time to individual site negotiations, but it does not represent a blanket ban on entering into new contracts.

If you are told that LGR actively prevents your Council from entering into new contracts, either check the Goverment's collections page linked above for the details, or ask the Council's Monitoring Officer to confirm whether a Section 24 Direction has actually been issued for your Council, and if so, whether a General Consent Order is in place. A General Consent order is usually made on or near to the same day that a Section 24 Direction takes effect, and defines a range of council business transactions that can continue without case-by-case approval. This prevents council business grinding to a halt during LGR transition periods.
The Barrier-Busting Resources in the Guide to Community Solar on Council Assets provide more detail for Council Officers on this point.

If your Council is already a Unitary Authority that is not subject to LGR, none of this section applies and you can focus entirely on navigating the internal structure of your existing Council, which the next two sections cover.

4 Which Council Officers will need to be involved?

Every Council organises itself slightly differently, and job titles vary enormously. What follows is a description of the functions you need to reach, and the kinds of titles those functions operate under.

When you are trying to find the right person in a specific Council, use the Council's published organisational structure (most Councils publish this on their website) to identify who holds these responsibilities. It is of course very likely that you already have a 'champion' in the Council, either an Officer or elected Member who is keen on what you are trying to do. Their support remains invaluable, but you will need to work with them to ensure that your proposals for the Council to adopt a strategic, corporately embedded approach to supporting Community Solar on Council Assets is really engaging with all the right stakeholders within the Council.

Many of these people have very senior roles with high levels of financial responsibility. It is only right that they tend to take a risk-averse approach. Your job is to present as a professional, capable group who can provide something that the Council needs in a reliable, predictable way. At the very least, you should be appropriately constituted with a bank account and all the structural necessities that allow you to enter into contracts. You cannot easily liaise with the Assets, Legal, Finance and Procurement teams of the Council as a group of un-constituted volunteers.

If you are still very much at the fledgling stage, you may benefit from mentoring support from an existing intermediary organisation that can provide this level of professionalism for you. The North Lincolnshire Case Study in this toolkit provides an example of how this can be done. Or you can use the Partnership Assessment Framework to see what your group needs to have in place in order to be a credible partner for a Council.

Go to www.netzerogo.org.uk to access this or ask your local Net Zero Hub for a copy.

Likely departments your project will interact with

What a Community Energy Group needs for a Solar PV project	Which department can approve this?	Likely job titles
Access to buildings and land	Estates/Asset Management	Head of Estates, Asset Manager, Corporate Property Manager, Head of Property Services
Procurement sign-off decisions about whether your proposal constitutes a Concession Contract, and whether it can be directly awarded or needs to be openly tendered.	Procurement/Commissioning	Head of Procurement, Commercial Manager, Commissioning Manager
Legal sign-off on leases and assessment of grounds on which the Council can work with you	Legal Services	Head of Legal Services, Monitoring Officer, Solicitor to the Council, Head of Governance and Legal
Power Purchase Agreements for the energy you generate and sell back to the building	Procurement/Legal Services	Head of Procurement, Commercial Manager, Commissioning Manager, Energy Purchasing Manager (in large authorities) Head of Legal Services, Monitoring Officer, Solicitor to the Council, Head of Governance and Legal
Financial sign-off and value-for-money assurance	Finance (Section 151 Officer)	Section 151 Officer, Director of Finance, Chief Finance Officer
Political approval to even think about this in the first place!	Cabinet - relevant portfolio holder (and ultimately Leader)	Cabinet Member for Climate/Environment/Assets/Regeneration (title varies by Council)

Estates and Asset Management

This is the team or individual who manages the Council's property portfolio. They hold the records of what the Council owns, they manage leases and relationships with tenants, and are the people who have to agree to you accessing a roof or a piece of land.

To further muddy the waters, the Council's property portfolio includes different forms of ownership, including 'General Fund Assets' (Town Hall, Car Parks and Leisure Centres), Housing Revenue Account assets (housing estates, surrounding land and some community buildings) and Schools Estate (maintained schools). The management of these assets and rules about what the Council can do with them can be fragmented, so it's important to factor this into your conversations to ensure you are at least considering the potential differences.

Without the Estates and Asset Management teams' involvement, or an understanding of the varied landscape they are navigating, you are unlikely to progress, and if your project is presented to them without any prior 'warm-up', they are likely to see it as unusual and risky. This team may already have progressed solar PV projects on parts of the Council's estate and may not immediately see the potential benefits of delivering this via the mechanism you are proposing; you will need to make the case for the wider social value and impact very strongly.

In a large Council this may be a substantial team with a Head of Estates or Director of Property. In a small District Council it may be a single Asset Manager who also covers facilities management and car parks. with an existing agreement already in place.

It will probably be difficult to engage directly with this team unless a senior Officer or Portfolio Holder has clearly asserted to them that the Council is interested in exploring community solar. This is best achieved by having some sort of strategic commitment adopted at the Council (for resources to help that happen, see the 'Decision-Making' part of the Guide to Community Solar on Council Assets). Their natural questions will be about liability, insurance, reasonable access, maintenance, and what happens at the end of the arrangement.

Legal Services

A lease or concession contract cannot be executed without legal sign-off. The Legal team will want to review any template documents you bring to them, and they will have questions about the legality of the chosen procurement route, the duration of the arrangement, and the liabilities involved.

In some Councils the legal function is entirely in-house; in others it is shared with neighbouring Councils or bought in externally. You may also hear references to a person called the Monitoring Officer – this is the Council's statutorily required legal representative, and is often the most senior lawyer employed by the Council. All Councils have to have a Monitoring Officer by law.

The Legal team's default position is often to probe for reasons why something cannot be done or what risks it carries. This is a core aspect of their job; they have to protect the Council from legal challenge. It does not mean the project cannot proceed. It does mean that political will (from the Portfolio Holder or Cabinet) often has to be in place before the Legal team will invest the time needed to work through complex issues constructively.

Legal teams tend to respond to instructions from above, not requests from community groups, or even from internal colleagues in non-statutory roles like the climate team. Their natural questions will be in support of those from the Asset Management team (about risks relating to access and maintenance) but they will also want to look closely at things like 'step-in rights' (how can the Council or another entity take over management of the asset if your group fails), along with issues such as liability for damage to buildings, and risks relating to asset sales and transfers (what happens if the Council wants to sell the building that you are leasing the roof of). Many of these have been covered by other community energy groups and you can find some 'barrier-busting' resources to help you in other parts of the Guide to Community Solar on Council Assets.

Procurement

Any arrangement involving a Community Energy Group operating on Council land and selling energy back to the Council (or to building occupants) is almost certainly a Concession Contract under the Procurement Act 2023 (which itself draws on the Concession Contracts Regulations 2016).

This means there is a procurement route to follow, and the Procurement team needs to be involved. This is not an obstacle, but be aware that some of the most successful community energy groups in the country got their projects underway before these regulations were in place. Therefore, simply pointing to what another Council did pre-2016 and hoping to emulate it is likely to lead to things going around in circles. The more detailed procurement suggestions provided in the Frequently Raised Barriers section in this toolkit sets out some options for how the Council could proceed at different scales of project under the current regulatory regime. Your Council will need to make their own legal judgement on those approaches.

Procurement Officers are often the people who raise a common objection along the lines of 'we cannot show preference to community groups over commercial operators.' This is a legitimate concern and can be properly addressed through appropriate outcome criteria in any procurement process. Properly structured, contracts can include social value criteria that a Community Energy Group can meet but that a purely commercial operator is unlikely to. Again, this requires Legal and Procurement working together, which is unlikely to happen without a political steer from above.

The Section 151 Officer

Every Council is required by law to have a Section 151 Officer (named after Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972). This is the Officer responsible for the Council's financial administration and for ensuring that the Council does not spend money it should not spend or commit to arrangements that are not financially sound. Their actual job title is usually Chief Finance Officer, Director of Finance, or similar.

This person, along with the Monitoring Officer, is often part of the most senior management in the Council. They will need to be in the loop from an early stage to ensure that they do not come into the project discussions late and raise their concerns after a lot of work has been done. Again, political steer to ask this senior Officer to be involved is likely to be vital.

5 Elected Member - where the political power lies

Councils have two distinct sides: the Officer side (the paid staff, permanent or on contract) and the Member side (the elected Members, also called Councillors). Officers implement decisions, but elected Members make them. Understanding which Councillors have the power to make things happen (and which do not) will save you a great deal of time and effort.

How most Councils are governed

The large majority of English Councils operate a 'Leader and Cabinet model'. Under this structure, the Full Council (all the Councillors) elects a Council Leader, who is usually the leader of the largest party. The Leader then appoints a small Cabinet of other Councillors, each with a specific policy portfolio.

To a large degree, this mirrors what happens in central Government – the 'ruling party' with a majority hold the major roles. The Leader (analogous to Prime Minister) and Cabinet Members (often called 'Portfolio Holders' in a Council) make a lot of executive decisions. Councillors from other smaller parties who do not have a majority are like opposition MPs in Parliament. They can bring Motions to Full Council for debate, and they represent the people in their Ward. But largely speaking, they cannot compel Officers to do anything that hasn't been signed off by Cabinet. Councillors from the leading party without a Cabinet role/portfolio are known as backbench Councillors and they, along with opposition Councillors, can also sit on a range of committees, including the very important Scrutiny Committee (which allows the rest of the Council to review Council decisions and hold them to account), and other statutory functions like Planning.

The role of Cabinet

The Cabinet makes the major decisions: it approves strategies, authorises significant contracts, and sets the policy direction for Officers to follow. Individual Cabinet Members have authority over their Portfolio area.

For community solar, the most relevant Portfolio Holder might well seem to be the Cabinet Member for Climate and Environment, but remember that this person is highly unlikely to have control over what you really need: assets and property, and legal or procurement functions are far more likely to sit under another Cabinet Member, such as 'Finance and Estates' or a similar title. In some Councils, this may even be the Leader's Portfolio.

There are a few things that Councils have to do by law. These are called their Statutory Duties, and include things like running a planning service, or schools, and dealing with waste.

For anything non-statutory (such as getting involved in community energy schemes), then an active decision has to be made that the Council is going to move forward with it. The Cabinet is ultimately the decision-making body you need to reach, because it is through their approval that activities end up adopted into the Corporate Plan and resources are allocated to make these happen, and monitoring and reporting requirements are set. A Decision Paper (Cabinet report) going to Cabinet is what will most likely unlock the detailed discussion and allocation of resource. Once it is approved at Cabinet, it can be added to the Corporate Plan, and Officers have their mandate to act.

Full Council

All of the Councillors meet, normally once a month, at a meeting usually just called 'Council' or 'Full Council'. This can be a fairly heated and political environment in many Councils, akin to debates in Parliament. However, it can also be a great avenue for bringing forward ideas that will ultimately end up as Decision Papers for Cabinet to consider and approve.

The idea of adopting a formal strategy that the Council should support the installation of community solar on its assets could come to Cabinet via that route. A supportive Councillor that you know could use the template Motion in this resource pack to raise this for debate at Full Council, with the aim of getting a majority vote that a detailed Decision Paper should be brought to Cabinet. All of the materials for this are provided in the Guide, but you should be wary of working with a Councillor who intends to use this for political theatre, or in a situation where they aim to score political points against the administration, knowing that the Motion will be rejected. Only use the Motion route with a Councillor who is sure they can get a cross-party supported outcome, or you may risk the outcome that the Council has discussed community energy and decided not to pursue it, potentially setting back your cause by several years.

Members of the public and community groups can attend Full Council and Cabinet Meetings, and, depending on the Council's Constitution, ask questions and make deputations to them.

Alternative ways of running a Council - The committee system

A minority of Councils operate a Committee system instead of a Leader and Cabinet model. Bristol City Council moved to this system in 2024, and it is used by a number of other Councils. Under this structure, there is a Leader but no Cabinet. Instead, decisions are made by politically-balanced Committees covering different service areas. The Committee covering your area of interest (possibly Environment, but remember again this is ultimately a decision for how assets are best utilised) is the body you need to get your idea in front of. The process is different but the principle is the same: you still need a formal report going to the right Committee.

6 Schemes of Delegation - when political approval is not needed

Reading the previous two sections, you might conclude that every decision your Council makes about community solar has to go through Cabinet. This is not quite right, and understanding the exception matters as much as understanding the rule.

Every Council operates what is called a Scheme of Delegation. This is a document (usually part of the Council's Constitution, and published on its website) that sets out which decisions can be made by Officers acting on their own authority, without needing a decision from Cabinet or Full Council. Delegation is typically organised by value threshold and by decision type.

For example, a Council might allow a Director to sign off any contract below £100,000, whilst anything above that threshold requires Cabinet approval. Thresholds vary enormously between Councils: a large Metropolitan Borough might delegate Officer authority up to £500,000, whilst a small District Council might require Cabinet sign-off on anything above £50,000.

For a Community Energy Group, this is important for two reasons.

First, it is possible that an individual site lease or licence, e.g. for a single rooftop on a relatively small building, would fall below the value threshold at which Cabinet approval is required. If the estimated value of the concession over its lifetime is modest enough, the relevant corporate Director or Head of Estates may be able to sign it off as a delegated Officer decision, without it going to Cabinet at all. This can be significantly faster, because a delegated Officer decision does not require a place on the Cabinet Forward Plan and does not need the six-week notice period that Key Decisions require.

Second, and equally important, once a Cabinet decision has been made to adopt a Community Solar Strategy (via the Decision Paper process provided elsewhere in this toolkit), that decision itself can be used in some circumstances to create a new delegated authority for future site-level decisions. Cabinet approval is sought once, for the overall programme, and individual site decisions are then made at Officer level within the parameters set by that approval. The Council's Scheme of Delegation is updated or confirmed to allow the relevant Officers to execute leases and licences without returning to Cabinet each time.

This may well represent the most efficient route for an ambitious group that is hoping to work with a Council across multiple buildings over time. Getting Cabinet to adopt a Community Solar on Council Assets Strategy is, if you have this sort of ambition, an investment of time that makes everything after it faster.

There are two cautions worth noting, however.

The first is that 'below threshold' does not mean 'below scrutiny.' A delegated Officer decision can still be called in by Councillors in most Councils, and Officer decisions are still also public documents. If a delegated decision to grant a roof lease to a Community Energy Group is politically controversial, it can still be challenged and delayed. Political support at Portfolio Holder level remains valuable even for decisions that do not technically require it.

The second caution is about aggregation. Procurement rules (and most Councils' own Contract Standing Orders) require that the total value of related contracts is considered together, not as individual separate items. This means that if you are hoping to agree leases across multiple buildings with the same Council over time, a Procurement Officer may well conclude that the aggregate value of those arrangements triggers a full competitive procurement process, even if each individual lease would fall below the threshold on its own.

In summary

The Scheme of Delegation is potentially very helpful, but only once the right senior authority is in place to underpin it. Find your Council's Constitution on its website, look for the Scheme of Delegation, and check the thresholds that apply to property and contract decisions. Then ask your Officer contact what delegated authority already exists, and what a Cabinet decision would need to say in order to create the delegated route for individual site decisions going forward. This can then inform the detail that goes into the Decision Paper.

7 Getting to an adopted Community Solar on Council Assets Strategy

Everything in this Guide is geared towards supporting ambition in Community Energy groups, who want to develop a range of projects on Council land and assets. To do this, it is worth investing the time to help champion Officers or Members bring a formal Decision Paper in front of the Council's decision-making body.

The Decision Paper - the anchor document

A Decision Paper (also called a Cabinet Report, or in some Councils an Executive Report) is a formal document that goes through the Council's governance process and results in a recorded Decision. It usually results in a binding instruction to Officers to proceed.

Before a Decision Paper reaches Cabinet, it has to be signed off by the relevant corporate Directors and Head of Legal Services. There should be no major surprises at the meeting where Cabinet discusses the issue.

This is why the document you are reading now is part of a wider set of resources that includes a Decision Paper template, a Strategy template, and a Full Council Motion template. These are the tools that Council Officers use to move a proposal through governance and get you the embedded, senior support you need. If your sustainability Officer contact or Councillor champion has access to these documents, they now hopefully have what they need to start that process.

What you can do now

There are practical steps your group can take to help this process along:

Help with the evidence base.

A Decision Paper needs financial figures, case studies, and a description of the proposed model. You can legitimately offer to provide case study material, indicative financial modelling, and examples of how similar arrangements have worked elsewhere. You are not writing the Decision Paper (that is the Officer's job) but you can make it much easier for them to write it.

Find a way to the relevant Portfolio Holder.

If you can get a direct conversation with the Cabinet Member who holds the relevant Portfolio, even briefly, it makes a significant difference. A Portfolio Holder who has expressed interest in a proposal will often be able to accelerate its progress through the Officer layer. Ask your sustainability Officer contact whether they can arrange an introduction, or look for other routes: community events, Council meetings, or your local connections (the relevant Portfolio Holder may also be the Ward Member in your area?) Help them to talk to their equivalent at another Council who has done this, preferably one from the same political party.

Be patient and politely persistent, but do not engage in activist tactics.

Council processes move slowly and Councils are rightly risk-averse. Many of them are also in the throes of LGR. The Forward Plan for a Key Decision typically requires six weeks' notice before a decision can be taken. A Decision Paper will go through at least one round of Officer comments before it reaches Cabinet. It can take a bare minimum of three months for a report like this to get into a meeting cycle. Build these timelines into your expectations, keep in regular contact with your Officer contact so the proposal does not drop off their priority list. Whatever you do, do not send 'copy-all' emails to a huge list of elected Members or senior Officers demanding action: you will attract a reputation as an irritant rather than a potential delivery partner.

8 A final note on politics and timing

Even if you are not in an LGR area, there will also be the normal pressures of Council political life to negotiate. Local elections happen every four years in many areas, with 'all-out' elections where every seat is up for re-election. In other areas, Councils operate an 'up-in-thirds' system where one third of the seats are contested each year for three years, followed by a 'fallow' year. Many of those will cease to exist after LGR but it is likely that about 10% will continue to do their elections this way.

However your Council runs its elections, it's important that you understand this cycle, and engage with all political players who may ultimately be in power as your proposals progress, and that you have been careful to think about the narratives you present for your project. Be as politically neutral as you can. If your project comes before Full Council as a result of a Motion (provided elsewhere in this toolkit), do everything you can to try to get the Motion proposed and seconded by Councillors from different parties. A cross-party Motion is far more likely to be adopted.

The combination of LGR and highly variable political control in some areas is why the resources in this toolkit are designed to get your work on a solid, corporately-supported footing in your local Council as soon as possible. The surest way to protect the status of Community Energy Organisations as delivery partners from political change is to get it adopted as formal Council policy (via the Strategy and Decision Paper process) rather than leaving it as an informal understanding with individual Officers or Members who could lose their jobs or their seats.

9 APPENDIX - Solar on Council-owned schools

Many Community Energy Organisations are keen to progress solar projects on their local schools. Schools are often anchor organisations in a community; they are highly visible, and offer great opportunities to advertise share offers and educate students and the wider community about renewable energy and energy-saving in general.

However, two factors make this approach less straightforward than it could be:

1

Not all schools are owned by the Local Authority – this is a persistent source of confusion for the community energy sector wishing to work directly with their Local Authority to access school sites. The table below provides a summary of the types of school that exist. If you are interested in schools in particular, you should liaise with the education department at the Council to access a full list of schools for your area, with their classifications, so that you gain a realistic insight into which ones the Local Authority can most effectively help you engage with.

2

Most schools require additional approvals to allow solar leases, which have to be granted by the Department for Education. This has been the case for some time and does not constitute a block on development, but should be built into your timetable as the approval process can be slow. You will need to follow the information on this government web page (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/submit-a-school-land-transaction-proposal), and complete the appropriate forms for your case.

However, note that the DfE consenting process is in a process of change, which has affected schools projects for several months now, and will continue to do so until autumn 2026...

A new international accounting standard came into effect on 1st of April 2024 (IFRS16). This removed the distinction between 'operating leases' (which most community solar on schools would be classed as), and 'finance leases'. Both are now classed as debt. The implications of this were that it caused confusion as to whether schools are allowed to take on the debt of entering into a long-term Power Purchase Agreement with an organisation that is renting their roof for solar generation, and selling the power back to the school.

This change caused a pause in the processing of DfE schools solar consents for some months during 2025. Following lobbying from the community energy sector, The Department of Education began re-accepting approving solar panel installations for PPA projects on school roofs while working on new arrangements in parallel.

As of July 16th 2026, applications have once again been temporarily paused. However, this is a targeted pause, triggered by the DfE's announcement of a pilot programme across 150 schools and colleges to unlock external finance for solar installations at scale. This will involve them testing their proposed schools-specific PPA and lease documents, the aim of which is to streamline this process in the future. The pilot will operate in the South East, the East Midlands, and Yorkshire and the Humber.

The DfE's July 2026 guidance stipulates that applications for schools solar that are submitted after 15 July 2026 must use the new PPA and land lease templates, but also notes that these templates will not be published until autumn 2026 following a testing period. The guidance distinguishes between schools selected for the 150-school pilot (in Yorkshire & Humber, East Midlands, and South East) and other schools, but does not clearly specify whether non-pilot schools can proceed during the testing period or must also wait for template publication. This ambiguity therefore creates a de facto pause for projects on many schools. Consult the DfE guidance page at the time of your asset assessment for the latest developments:

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/power-purchase-agreement-pilot/funding-for-installing-solar-photovoltaic-panels-on-schools-and-colleges

A summary of the types of school and responsibilities

School type	Most likely body that will: Own the school's land/ buildings	Pay for the school's running cost	Sign off any lease/PPA
Community School	Local Authority	Local Authority	Local Authority & DfE
Pupil Referral Unit	Local Authority	Local Authority	Local Authority & DfE
Voluntary Controlled	Trust (usually Diocesan)	Local Authority	Local Authority
Voluntary Aided	Trust (usually Diocesan)	Local Authority and Trust	Local Authority, Trust and/or Diocese, & DfE
Foundation School	Trust	Local Authority and Trust	Local Authority, Trust and/or Diocese, & DfE
Free School	Trust	Trust and DfE	Local Authority, Trust & DfE
Academy Converter	Academy (single or Multi Academy Trust)	Academy/MAT and DfE	Academy/MAT & DfE
Academy Sponsored	Academy (single or Multi Academy Trust)	Academy/MAT and DfE	Academy/MAT & DfE

A final note on schools – falling school rolls (due to lower birth rates) means that in some areas, school estate rationalisation may be needed in the next 10-20 years. Your Council's education team should be engaged very early to understand both the ownership situation (as per the table above) and any concerns about long-term leases on school buildings that may need to be disposed of.