

From the Ground Up: How Local Stakeholders Experience Energy Planning

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Executive Summary

This policy brief summarises the findings of an 18-respondent survey of Oxfordshire energy planning stakeholders, conducted as part of a knowledge exchange fellowship between the University of Oxford and Oxfordshire County Council. The survey explored how local organisations have engaged with energy planning to date, what they feel they can contribute, what is holding them back, and who they think should help. This work complements previous fellowship research into energy planning governance by examining how emerging planning arrangements are experienced by local stakeholders in practice.

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The survey suggests that local stakeholders want to contribute to energy planning and possess valuable knowledge, expertise and practical experience. However, existing governance arrangements do not provide sufficient clarity, capacity or influence to support meaningful participation. Stakeholders reported widespread uncertainty about roles and responsibilities, limited organisational capacity to engage, and doubts about whether participation meaningfully influences decisions. Notably, greater experience of energy planning did not appear to improve understanding of who is responsible for what, suggesting that participation alone may not resolve governance confusion.

Respondents consistently identified local authorities as the organisations best placed to coordinate local energy planning activity and support engagement. Together, these findings suggest that the challenge is not a lack of local knowledge or willingness to participate, but the absence of governance arrangements that effectively mobilise local expertise and provide clear routes for participation and influence.

Key messages

1. Local stakeholders want to contribute and possess valuable knowledge and expertise.
2. Roles and responsibilities in energy planning are unclear, even for experienced participants.
3. Capacity constraints and limited influence reduce meaningful participation.
4. Local authorities are viewed as best placed to coordinate local energy planning and stakeholder engagement.
5. The challenge is not a lack of local evidence or expertise, but how local knowledge is mobilised and used.



Introduction

Regional Energy Strategic Planning (RESP) is a new and fast-moving field. NESO has established RESP teams across eleven nations and regions of Britain, each tasked with bringing regional and local evidence into decisions that will shape future energy infrastructure investment. This is a significant shift: it asks local organisations, many with no prior experience of formal energy planning, to contribute data, knowledge and expertise, helping to set priorities that were previously determined nationally or were left to the market.

The new approach to energy planning is underpinned and guided by six principles designed to ensure the process is place-based, whole-system, vision-led, proactive, fair, transparent and collaborative. Democratic accountability and stakeholder coordination sit at the centre. As the energy regulator, Ofgem, put it in setting out the function of regional energy planning, “we are embedding regional voices into the process and ensuring those who influence and are influenced by the strategic plan have a say”. This brief tests how that ambition looks from the ground up, asking the organisations RESP is meant to involve how well the process is actually working for them.

The survey was distributed to approximately 100 Oxfordshire-based organisations whom had previously engaged with the development of an Oxfordshire Local Area Energy Plan (OxLAEP) in some way. It asked how these organisations have engaged with energy planning to date, what they feel they can contribute, what is holding them back, and who they think is best placed to support them.

Eighteen responses were received, a modest response rate that likely reflects limited engagement with energy planning as a subject rather than non-response to the survey itself. Respondents nonetheless spanned a meaningful range of prior knowledge and experience, giving the findings some breadth despite the small sample: most respondents (13 of 18) reported having some experience of energy planning, most commonly through OxLAEP (10 of 18),

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though this experience was often thin. Only three organisations reported substantial, sustained participation in any form of energy planning, with most describing limited and piecemeal engagement.

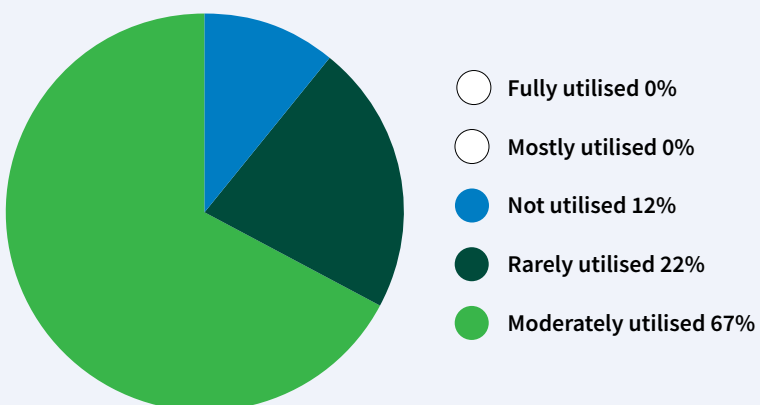
Key findings are presented below. They complement earlier work undertaken through the fellowship examining energy planning governance. While that work identified challenges around coordination, accountability and institutional alignment, this survey explores how those issues are experienced by local stakeholders engaged in energy planning.

Local knowledge exists but is not currently mobilised

Respondents reported a breadth of knowledge and expertise relevant to energy planning, ranging from community insight through to technical, commercial, delivery and implementation expertise. Yet whether that knowledge translates into future contributions is far from certain. Only half of respondents said they were likely to contribute to the development of a Regional Energy Strategic Plan, and even that willingness was often conditional on having sufficient time, resources or a clear invitation to participate. One respondent framed it as something they would do “if asked” underlying a sense of ambivalence, rather than something they

were actively planning for. The remainder were unsure (a third) or unlikely to contribute. The findings suggest that the challenge is not a lack of local expertise, but uncertainty about how that expertise can be effectively brought into emerging planning processes.

To what extent do you feel this knowledge is currently used in energy planning?



“We will participate if we have the capacity.”

“Even though we take part as much as possible, the jargon and processes are far too complex and off-putting for non-specialists.”

Most respondents felt their existing knowledge is currently underused in energy planning. Those with financial, commercial, delivery or implementation expertise, saw their input as least drawn upon. Together, these findings point to an opportunity: a pool of relevant local expertise that current processes are not yet capturing.

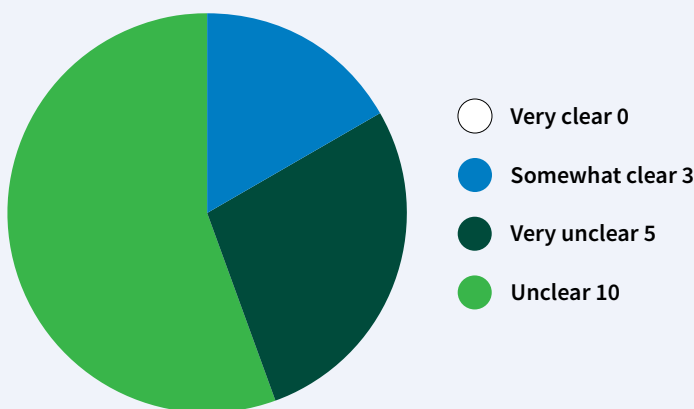
Roles are widely seen as unclear and don't get clearer with experience

A central function of regional energy planning is coordinating the different actors involved – local authorities, network operators, NESO, developers, communities, regulators, government – so that each understands what it is responsible for and where decisions get made. On this, the survey's finding is stark: 84% of respondents said roles and responsibilities across local, regional and national actors are unclear or very unclear.

Nor does this improve simply through greater involvement. Among respondents who have direct experience participating in an energy planning processes like OxLAEP, neighbourhood retrofit or heat network planning, only

a minority (3) said roles had become clearer to them over time; for most, clarity either stayed the same (5) or got worse (5). Direct experience of the system, in other words, is at least as likely to expose its confusions as to resolve them. This suggests governance complexity cannot be addressed through participation alone and may require clearer institutional arrangements and accountability.

In your opinion how clear are roles and responsibilities across local, regional, and national actors in energy planning at present?



Capacity, not willingness, is what's holding local stakeholders back

When asked about the systemic barriers to developing effective regional energy plans, lack of capacity or resources was the single biggest barrier reported. Insufficient engagement was the second most widely cited system-level barrier. Given NESO's role in coordinating Regional Energy Strategic Planning and stakeholder engagement, this finding raises questions about how participation can be broadened and strengthened as RESP develops.

Limited internal capacity was also the most frequently cited organisational barrier stopping local organisations contributing to clean heat planning and delivery, marking organisational capacity as an acute challenge. Beyond this, local stakeholders saw limited influence on decision making and lack of funding or commercial viability as the second and third organisational barriers to clean heat.

Across the piece, three further barriers came through as widely shared, low-intensity frictions rather than acute pain points. They were mentioned often, but rarely as anyone's single biggest concern. They included limited access to funding, unclear roles and limited influence in RESP decision-making, suggesting they are widely shared frustrations rather than sharp pain points for any single organisation.

One result stands out by its absence: local data and evidence, which sits at the heart of Regional Energy Strategic Planning, was not seen by respondents as a barrier. The problem, on this evidence, is less about the availability of local data and its contribution than about how organisations are supported to contribute it, how much confidence they have that doing so makes a difference and what their roles are vis-a-vis others beyond contributing data.

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Local stakeholders look to local authorities, not national bodies, for support

When asked what support they need and who should provide it, respondents called for support convening stakeholders, accessing funding and developing capacity and they overwhelmingly look to local authorities (backed by third-sector intermediaries) to provide it, not national government, NESO or network operators.

This raises questions of the role of local authorities in regional and local energy planning. Whilst Ofgem describes local authorities' role in regional energy planning as limited to "inputs to strategic planning, as opposed to assuming a direct role in local planning" (Ofgem, 2023, p.19), the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero has designated them heat network 'Zone Coordinators'. This survey suggests a growing gap between how local authorities are formally positioned within emerging planning frameworks and how local stakeholders expect them to operate in practice.

Conclusion

Three findings sit at the heart of this survey, and they reinforce each other. Local stakeholders do not always know who is responsible for what; many lack the capacity to engage even when they want to; and even when they do engage, they are not always confident that participation will influence decisions. These are not isolated challenges but interconnected features of emerging energy planning arrangements.

Local organisations reported a wide range of skills, practical experience and place-based understanding relevant to energy planning.

Importantly, the survey found little evidence that a lack of local knowledge or expertise is the primary constraint. Local organisations reported a wide range of skills, practical experience and place-based understanding relevant to energy planning. The challenge appears to be creating governance arrangements capable of mobilising that expertise effectively and transparently.

Respondents most frequently identified local authorities as the organisations best placed to coordinate local engagement and support participation. While this does not in itself determine what the future role of local government should be, it suggests that local authorities are likely to remain important actors within emerging planning arrangements. The findings therefore strengthen the case for ensuring that coordination, accountability, capacity and participation receive continued attention as Regional Energy Strategic Planning develops.



Recommendations

For DESNZ and Ofgem

Give local authorities a clear, funded mandate to convene local energy planning stakeholders. Local organisations look to local authorities to provide guidance and support on data input and convening local stakeholders. Formalising and resourcing that role, rather than leaving it to discretion provides one means to fix the coordination gap identified in this survey.

For NESO

Treat role clarity of stakeholder roles and local influence as coordination failures and delivery risks, not communications problems. Publish a plain-language map of who decides what in the RESP process and how local data actually shapes RESP short- and long-term pathway development. Where local authorities are already trusted conveners, work with them rather than around them.

For local authorities

Build on existing powers to convene local stakeholders. Even without new funding, low-cost steps such as a single local point of contact for RESP-related queries or a standing forum for local organisations to compare notes would help address the capacity and clarity gaps this survey found, and strengthen the case for further investment in this role.

About the Research

This brief draws on a knowledge exchange project between the University of Oxford and Oxfordshire County Council examining energy planning and delivery in practice. It summarises the results of a survey exploring local organisations participation in and experience of regional and local energy planning. Oxfordshire provides a useful case study because it has participated in Regional Energy Strategy Planning, is developing a county-wide Local Area Energy Plan (OxLAEP), and engaged in wider clean heat planning initiatives, creating an opportunity to explore how new planning frameworks are emerging in practice.

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