

Empower: Upskilling for Local Area Energy Planning, Impact Report

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1. Background

In 2025, SP Electricity North West (SP ENW) commissioned Create Clarity to undertake independent stakeholder research with 16 local authorities, to better understand their progress in developing Local Area Energy Plans (LAEPs) and the key barriers they face.

The review assessed how effectively SP ENW supports local authorities in the development and delivery of LAEPs, and how this support should evolve in the context of emerging Regional Energy System Plans (RESPs) and the National Energy System Operator (NESO).

Recognising the critical role of LAEPs in green growth and regional economic development, and responding directly to the feedback from local authorities, SP ENW partnered with Green Economy to launch the pilot programme *Empower: Upskilling for Local Area Energy Planning*. The programme was designed to test the effectiveness of a comprehensive, accessible education offer to help local authorities overcome identified capability and capacity barriers.

2. Programme Development

Barriers to LAEP Delivery Programme

To support local authorities at different stages of developing a Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP), and to meet the needs of colleagues at varying stages of their careers, the training has been structured into three levels to help overcome identified barriers and ensure appropriate delivery.

Introduction to Local Area Energy Planning

The Intro level was delivered as an e-learning course, designed to take around one hour 30 minutes to complete.

This introductory course provides an overview of Local Area Energy Planning, explaining what it is, why it matters, and how it supports the UK's transition to a net zero energy system.

The first module covers how our energy gets from power stations to our homes and defines key terms that learners will come across in conversations around energy planning.

The second module outlines key technologies that can be deployed as part of a LAEP and gives learners an overview of the benefits and challenges associated with each technology.

The third module introduces learners to more key terms, specifically related to energy supply and demand and explores real life examples that demonstrate how the Distribution System Operator (DSO) and National Energy System Operator (NESO) can ensure demand and supply are balanced.

The final module highlights the benefits of LAEPs for key stakeholders, including local businesses, residents, and elected officials and asks learners to consider how they might pitch the benefits of a LAEP to different actors in their local area.

Build your LAEP

Build your LAEP was designed as a workshop for local authorities who did not yet have a LAEP in place.

Based on Energy Systems [Catapult's \(ESC\)](#) 7 stage framework, the workshop provides a practical, end-to-end guide to creating a LAEP, from preparation and stakeholder engagement to modelling future scenarios, selecting pathways, and turning insights into actionable, prioritised projects.

The learning objectives of the workshop were that by the end of the day learners should be able to:

- Create an LAEP from existing template
- Demonstrate the value of building an LAEP to key stakeholders
- Develop an action plan for ongoing co-ordination.

The workshop aimed to build confidence by familiarising learners with each stage of ESC's framework and identifying relevant tools at each part of the journey including SP ENW's data hub, the Treasury Green Book guidance and ESC's stakeholder engagement plan.

Examples of best practice from existing LAEPs were also introduced to demonstrate how the LAEP can and should look in practice.

The first part of the day focused on stakeholder engagement, using a role play exercise to immerse learners in the process of getting colleagues and community actors on board.

Finally, learners worked in Local Authority groups to create a plan of action for moving their LAEP planning forward.

Deliver your LAEP

Deliver your LAEP was designed as a workshop for local authorities who have a LAEP in place but are struggling to move forward with identified projects.

The workshop focused on turning a completed LAEP into real, investable projects by teaching participants how to identify suitable sites for generation, storage, and flexibility solutions; assess environmental and grid constraints; and score locations using practical criteria.

The learning objectives of the workshop were that by the end of the day learners should be able to:

- Assess sites for suitability for LAEP projects
- Identify potential sources of funding and investment
- Communicate the value of key projects to stakeholders.

The morning session introduced learners to useful tools for assessing site suitability and included a deep dive into the SP ENW data hub. Colleagues demonstrated a number of features of the tool, then learners applied this knowledge to their own projects and were able to work with the facilitators to troubleshoot in real time.

The afternoon session explored funding routes, business models and partnership structures—from community energy to private sector joint ventures—and demonstrated how to build compelling business cases that communicate economic, social, and environmental value.

Participants

Introduction to Local Area Energy Planning

- Participants from LAs: Cumbria, South Ribble, Manchester, Salford, Lancaster, Bury, Wigan and Trafford.

Build your LAEP

- Four participants from two LAs: Cumbria and South Ribble.

Deliver your LAEP

- Participants from four LAs: Salford, Bury, Wigan and Trafford.

3. Feedback

Methodology

To gather feedback across the three levels, two methods were used:

- Online surveys for each level that asked participants to rate their knowledge or confidence against the stated learning objectives as well as free text questions asking for suggested improvements, anything missing and what support would be useful for SP ENW to provide.
- 30-minute teams call to ask more in-depth questions about the participant's experience of the e-learning module and the workshop.

Intro feedback

Nine feedback calls were completed.

The feedback on the intro learning was overwhelmingly positive. Participants at all levels found the course both useful and accessible and that it was a great precursor to the workshops. The content was pitched at an appropriate level to a wide range of colleagues, including those new to energy planning, more experienced colleagues, and those needing a refresher. In general, all learners found the platform straightforward and easy to use, and most learners completed the course in less than one hour.

Learners would recommend the course to their non-technical colleagues but felt that senior staff or elected officials would be unlikely to set aside the time to complete the course, and that shorter resources to engage senior leadership would be helpful.

The majority of learners didn't feel that anything was missing or didn't make sense, though a couple of participants suggested that greater clarity on what was being asked of them on the exercise would be useful. Another suggestion for improvement included suggesting responses for the 'Communicating the benefits' exercise so that learners could better understand if their answers were along the right lines.

The explainer videos included in the course were largely taken from existing Energy Systems Catapult and SP Electricity North West material, as such the branding and some of the content is slightly out of date and so new videos will need to be produced; for example the ESC video 'what is a LAEP' is focused on meeting net zero goals, whereas SP ENW are moving away from 'net zero' terminology and toward focusing on 'green growth' and 'energy security'.

From a design perspective, the supply and demand game needs to be edited to ensure smoother transitions, and additional scenarios added to provide a fuller picture of the energy system.

Recommendations for future development

- Create clearer instructions for exercises
- A more diverse group of stakeholders – including elected officials who are anti renewables and have negative sentiments towards the net zero agenda
- New video production with up-to-date SP ENW branding
 - What is a LAEP – explaining a LAEP without reference to 'net zero' goals and a focus on green growth.
 - What are flexibility services?
- Produce short videos to engage senior leadership and elected officials
 - What is a LAEP?
 - How can a LAEP benefit your local area?
- Produce a short slide deck that LAs can use to 'sell' the benefits of a LAEP to senior leadership and elected officials

Build feedback

Four feedback calls were completed; four feedback forms were returned.

The overall feedback for the workshop was extremely positive. Participants consistently described the workshop as engaging, well-placed and surprisingly energising for a full day. All learners felt the material would be useful in their work and left feeling more confident about understanding the LAEP methodology, explaining the LAEP process to colleagues and senior leaders, and starting the process of wider colleague engagement. Participants also found the physical copies of the DSO jargon buster provided really useful.

Suggestions for improvement included

- Including pre-work on the seven-stage framework to reduce descriptive content in the session
- More in-depth support on the SP ENW data hub
- More examples of LAEPs in councils that have created their plan internally (rather than paying consultants)
- Practical advice on how to get the project (of building a LAEP) off the ground.

Relevant templates and checklists were also highlighted as something that would be valuable as well as better signposting to existing ESC templates and resources.

While the workshop was successful in improving confidence around stakeholder engagement, all participants suggested that more support in this area would be needed to support councils convene the right actors and secure buy-in. Green Economy/SP ENW-hosted stakeholder sessions were suggested as something that would be valuable and supportive to this end.

A key challenge that was identified for LAs at the build stage was funding of the LAEP itself i.e. finding budget to pay consultants for tasks that LAEP teams could not complete in house or access to certain types of data sets that may be needed for mapping tasks. Indicative costs of different levels of consultancy input are essential for teams to secure the required budget for LAEP development.

Generally, learners found the one-day session valuable, particularly with regards to travel time vs learning time and a space to focus on LAEP building away from the office. At the same time participants highlighted a need for shorter, more focused modules on particular topics (funding, community energy, retrofit etc.) and it was suggested that a shorter session at the local authority offices would be an effective way of bringing together the wider team needed to construct a LAEP.

Recommendations for future development

- E-learning course on the seven-stage model (*required pre-requisite to workshop*)
- Resources outlining indicative costs for each stage of LAEP development e.g. consultancy fees for specific mapping tasks
- Split the session into morning and afternoon workshops
 - Morning workshop focused on general advice and case studies from other regions – activities mix authorities to share questions and experiences
 - Afternoon workshop LAs split into their relative groups and work on specific local challenges with a dedicated facilitator.
- Bespoke action-focused session delivered at local authority offices to bring in wider stakeholders.
- More case studies/examples of best practice
- E-learning course on application of Green Book appraisal methodology

Testimonials

"I thought it was really good ... I came out of the sessions at the end of the day and thought that this is totally doable" Phil Deurdin, Cumberland Council

"I've found it very interesting and has greatly improved my knowledge, this being from a very basic level"

"The training was excellent, struggling to immediately think of improvements."

"It was great! Came away really enthusiastic about the prospect of a LAEP"

"We were surprised how engaged we continued to be throughout... right up until the end."

"I really liked it... properly engaged throughout the whole thing."

Delivery feedback

Four feedback calls were completed; four feedback forms were returned.

The overall sentiment was strongly positive, and participants repeatedly described the workshop as useful, interesting, engaging and practical and found the exercise on the data hub particularly useful. Learners reported that the training reaffirmed project choices, introduced new appraisal considerations (e.g. security, ownership, grid constraints) and improved confidence to engage with existing and potential partners.

Some learners found the content less relevant for their roles – particularly those in the planning department and those working on domestic retrofit. It was also highlighted that decarbonising heating was not addressed in the content. From a design perspective, the training focused on the principles around funding and investment so that they could be applied across the board, however, it is clear that more detailed support around heating and retrofit is needed.

The cross-authority discussions were particularly valuable as were the hands-on exercises and case studies. It was suggested by a number of learners that more detailed case studies on exactly how other local authorities got projects off the ground would be particularly valuable.

Recommendations for future development

Rather than one-day training, support at the 'Deliver' level should take place across a series of half-day workshops that bring different local authorities together to address a particular topic.

Topics should include:

- Low carbon heating solutions
- Domestic retrofit – council owned and private houses
- Whole building solutions for commercial buildings
- Specific session for planners – how to interrogate planning applications with regards to LAEP, future homes standard, existing standards
- Partnering with community energy groups

Testimonials

"It was really good ... having different local authorities there was really helpful being able to share ideas and swap information" Hayley Nixon, Salford Council

"A very comprehensive training session with a good mix of technical information, Knowledge sharing and exchange of ideas with colleagues from neighboring authorities"

"I thought it was excellent. Well-paced. Very informative. Good and knowledgeable presenters plus useful to hear from other LAs. Relaxed and friendly. Confidence of 3 stars is an improvement from 0 (for me!)"

"Excellent training"

"Really good session, good to hear from other LA's and have discussions about how others are addressing this. Really helped my understanding for the electricity network and the data page was a revelation"

4. SP ENW support

Generally, participants were happy with the existing level of support offered from SP ENW, and many already have relationships with members of the DSO team. Suggestions for improvement generally focused on the usability of the data hub as well as more dialogue at the design phase of projects to avoid late-stage feasibility issues.

Early advisory engagement and a consistent accessible advisory channel for smaller projects as well as strategic developments would support more efficient delivery of projects and better engagement with the data hub by local authorities.

Data hub

Recommended developments for the data hub include

- Short video tutorials on how to access required data on specific asks e.g. a walk through how to find the headroom for generation on a particular site, or how to establish demand headroom in a particular area
 - Solar on council buildings
 - Solar carports
 - Small scale EV
- Making satellite view available
- Enabling participants to use the same log in for the data sets tool and the small-scale solar tool – currently the solar tool has a separate login and no one was able to access this during the workshop.
- Data hub 'clinics', online Q&A sessions where LA colleagues can bring questions and learn in a peer-to-peer setting.

5. Next steps

Suggested programme structure

Introduction to Local Area Energy Planning

Remain as one e-learning module.

Build your LAEP

E-learning course on ESC's seven-stage framework.

Morning session – practical workshop on actioning the key components of the framework, sharing knowledge and challenges with other LAs.

Afternoon session – challenge focused workshops where local authorities work in groups with their colleagues and a facilitator to address a specific challenge.

E-learning course

Action planning session – half-day workshop delivered at the local authority offices

Deliver your LAEP

Replace the one-day workshop with a series of topic based half-day workshops open to all local authorities across the North West.

Recommendations

Going forward we should work more closely with ESC and North West Net Zero Hub. One of the challenges for local authorities is making sense of which support and resources will be most useful and establishing an understanding of who is offering what. This project has a unique opportunity to bring together a wealth of information and understanding that exists across a number of organisations which will be most effective with better communication and collaboration.

Future development should focus on specific pain points that block local authorities from progressing with their LAEPs, and feedback should be gathered regularly to ensure that learning solutions remain relevant and useful to participants.





- Introduction to Local Area Energy Planning
- Build your LAEP
- Deliver your LAEP

6. Appendix 1: Build survey responses

Q1: Has this training improved your knowledge and understanding of how to build your Local Area Energy Plan?

Where 1 is not improved at all and 5 is improved significantly


Average rating: 4.75

Number of stars	Response percent	Response count
	0.00%	0
	0.00%	0
	0.00%	0
	25.00%	1
	75.00%	3

Q2: How confident do you feel in creating a LAEP using the seven-stage framework?

Where 1 is not confident at all and 5 is very confident

Average rating: 3.5

Number of stars	Response percent	Response count
	0.00%	0
	0.00%	0
	50.00%	2
	50.00%	2
	0.00%	0

Q3: How confident do you feel in identifying potential opportunities for storage and generation within a local area?

Where 1 is not confident at all and 5 is very confident

Average rating: 3.75

Number of stars	Response percent	Response count
★	0.00%	0
★ ★	0.00%	0
★ ★ ★	50.00%	2
★ ★ ★ ★	25.00%	1
★ ★ ★ ★ ★	25.00%	1

Q4: How confident do you feel communicating the value of building a LAEP to key stakeholders?

Where 1 is not confident at all and 5 is very confident




Average rating: 3.75

Number of stars	Response percent	Response count
★	0.00%	0
★ ★	25.00%	1
★ ★ ★	0.00%	0
★ ★ ★ ★	50.00%	2
★ ★ ★ ★ ★	25.00%	1

Q5: How confident do you feel that you will be able to sustain ongoing co-ordination between key stakeholders?

Where 1 is not confident at all and 5 is very confident

Average rating: 3.50

Number of stars	Response percent	Response count
	0.00%	0
	0.00%	0
	50.00%	2
	50.00%	2
	0.00%	0

Q6: What support do you need from SP Electricity North West to move forward with building your LAEP?

- Continued primary stakeholder support for every stage. Firstly, providing data and data support for initial stages, then assistance in understanding the local energy area. I think realistic and supportive feedback with commitment to the plan would be essential to supporting the borough's LAEP.
- Continued access to their data portal and to LEAP+ should that become available. Will need a single point of contact that could represent SP ENW in stakeholder capacity, attend meetings, and support with data and scenario modelling.
- Support with data, funding
- Best practice guidance and materials, regular contact for any questions that come up

Q7: How could we improve this training?

- I've found it very interesting and has greatly improved my knowledge, this being from a very basic level. I thought the engaging elements to the session were definitely needed as the slides have lots of words (although these were very nicely summarised). The last sections on demonstrating value and a plan for co-ordination could possibly be said at the start? - I find it helpful to understand wider picture and these sections really helped me apply the knowledge, so could be beneficial at start and then an activity linked to them after all the steps mentioned!!
- The training was excellent, struggling to immediately think of improvements. Perhaps 5mins on the ESC templates if that's allowed.
- May work well if involving that broader stakeholder group. Less time could be taken covering aspects that could be looked at prior (7 stages of LAEP).
- Can't think of anything off the top of my head, it was great! Came away really enthusiastic about the prospect of a LAEP

Q8: Any further comments?

- As mentioned, I have little knowledge on the subject and majority of the time I didn't find it overwhelming!! It was very useful!
- Happy to feedback any further thoughts on the follow up call.
- Sceptical at first but the play acting was really helpful in actually articulating those benefits to a prospective stakeholder.

7. Appendix 2: Deliver survey responses

Q6: What support do you need from SP Electricity North West to move forward with building your LAEP?

- Our LAEP is rather conceptual (e.g. lots of refs to hydrogen). Would be helpful to have stringer data / evidence
- Funding support
- Regular catch up meetings
- Help in identifying opportunities
- EV and solar delivery
- Communication about projects feasibility
- Not sure
- Information applications low carbon. Generation and smart meters forward planning and portal map and data

Q7: How could we improve this training?

- I thought it was excellent. Well-paced. Very informative. Good and knowledgeable presenters plus useful to hear from other LAs. Relaxed and friendly. Confidence of three stars is an improvement from 0 (for me!)
- More worked examples. Discussion/case studies around working with developers bringing forward large strategic sites
- Would be good to address how we tackle heating. I feel this is the most challenging area of LAEP and will lead to the biggest improvement
- Really interesting would be good to consider housing retrofit, whole building solutions for commercial buildings too
- Possibly an overview of various technologies i.e. heat pumps etc.
- Excellent training

Q8: Any further comments?

- More on heat pumps
- Really good session, good to hear from other LAs and have discussions about how others are addressing this. Really helped my understanding for the electricity network and the data page was a revelation!
- Thank you for an interesting day!
- Thought-provoking and useful
- Share delegates details for further peer information and learning