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# Spatial Approaches to Local Energy Planning

Case study: Oldham

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## This resource is part of the Spatial Approaches to Local Energy Planning (SALEP) suite

This resource is part of the RTPI's SALEP (Spatial Approaches to Local Energy Planning) suite of guidance, analysis and in-depth case studies on integrating energy planning with town planning across the UK. It was produced in collaboration with Regen.

For more information and access to the rest of the suite, please visit the [SALEP webpage](#).

## Authors

This document was produced by Regen with input from the RTPI.

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# 1. Case study summary

Oldham Council is a local authority within the wider Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) remit. In 2021, the GMCA procured and published Local Area Energy Plans (LAEPs) for the local authorities within the region. Recognising the need for a more local-level approach to bring forward the findings of the LAEP, Oldham Council has supported the development of a Community-Led Energy Planning (CLEP) approach.

## 2. Key insights

- The case study of Oldham Council provides an innovative example of the value of involving the local community in assessing and prioritising the outputs of the LAEP through the development of a CLEP.
- However, it also highlights the challenges of providing weight to community level-insights in planning.
- It also reveals the missed opportunities that can occur when the LAEP process does not fully engage with local authority officers.

## 3. Context and background

Oldham Council is a local authority within the wider GMCA. In 2021, the GMCA procured and published LAEPs for the local authorities within the region.

The plans, produced by Energy Systems Catapult, were envisioned as strategic tools for guiding decarbonisation at the local level. At that time, Oldham Council was already exploring ways to decarbonise its borough, and the LAEP served as a valuable evidence base for its ongoing efforts. However, Oldham Council realised that the LAEP methodology did not take enough account of local-level community priorities in formulating plans. To address this, Oldham Council is working with Carbon Co-op, a local community energy organisation responsible for creating the CLEP methodology, to develop and further roll out CLEP to extend the LAEP methodology to a more local level. This approach involves communities in testing the suitability of the LAEP at the local level and identifying key opportunities.

The LAEP development in 2021 also coincided with the local authority's update of its local plan, which will help to guide development in the borough up to 2039. The consultation for the draft local plan occurred in 2021, with the updated plan published in 2023. The local plan is set to be adopted in 2025.

## 4. Development of the Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP)

Oldham Council's involvement in the LAEP development process was minimal, particularly in terms of direct input from the town planning team. While Energy Systems Catapult made efforts to engage with the council and provided an opportunity to incorporate any locally available data, Oldham Council lacked significant internal resources and data to be able to contribute. As a result, the LAEP largely represented an external effort, described by local authority stakeholders as *"done to us but that was fine."*

Despite this, the published LAEP has provided a useful evidence base for the local authority's decarbonisation initiatives, including through informing a high-level business case for decarbonising the area and contributing to the development of a prospectus for attracting private-sector investment. This was seen as valuable to the local authority, as it is keen to explore potential joint ventures with private-sector investors. The local authority officers also identified the LAEP's value as an evidence base that can be used as justification for planners and developers to help progress low-carbon projects.

However, the lack of local authority involvement in the LAEP process led to some potential missed opportunities. The local authority officers identified that while the LAEP has provided useful information, the recommendations in the plan are focused on what was possible at the time of the study, in the context of existing policy, rather than exploring a full range of technical possibilities. For example, despite a local authority request for the LAEP to consider suitable sites for wind energy, the LAEP did not consider this technology as, at the time, wind energy was not supported by national planning policy in England. Since the publication of the LAEP the national planning policy for onshore wind has changed and the local authority is keen to progress opportunities for this technology. As a result, the local authority is now working with the GMCA on a separate study to assess wind energy resource, identifying areas where wind energy might be most acceptable. The intention is for this separate study to then carry weight in planning terms, potentially as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) (although the government's potential phased move from SPDs to supplementary plans has not yet been considered). Considering wind energy within the LAEP would likely have removed the need for this additional work.

## 5. Integration with the local plan

The timing of the LAEP coincided with the drafting of Oldham Council's local plan, creating some opportunities for alignment. The external LAEP team did not have any direct involvement with the development of the local plan, such as through working groups or cross-departmental meetings. However, the council noted that, during this time, the LAEP development team could be contacted to ask about the outputs of the LAEP.

The draft local plan contains the following reference to the LAEP:

*“The Oldham Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) identifies opportunities for low carbon energy including solar, hydrogen, heat pumps, electric vehicle charging and a district heat network. In addition, the council is working on an Oldham Mine Water Heat Network project...”*

The local plan thus refers to the LAEP but cannot give any additional weight to projects identified in it.

Additionally, the LAEP is starting to feed into subsequent planning work such as the current development of an EV Charging Infrastructure Strategy. In this context, the LAEP is providing useful spatial data on housing types to inform where off-street chargers can be located. Such an example shows how LAEP data can be drawn upon to help inform wider decarbonisation planning.

However, the integration of the LAEP and local plan has faced several limitations, most notably:

- **LAEPs can provide evidence, but not weight within the town planning system:** The LAEP serves as part of the local plan's evidence base but lacks enforceability or significant weight within the town planning framework. It has, therefore, had limited impact in town planning terms.
- **Evolving evidence for renewable energy:** As discussed above, the absence of consideration of onshore wind through the LAEP has necessitated additional studies.
- **Lack of community-level input on local priorities (as discussed below):** Local authority officers felt that the published LAEP failed to account for local community priorities. While providing a broad strategic overview, the LAEP process did not consider local community needs, and officers expect that this could potentially create challenges in real-world implementation.

There is also a recognition from the local authority that there will be a need for additional engagement with planning officers to ensure they know what the LAEP is and how it could be used within town planning.

## 6. Community-Led Energy Planning (CLEP)

In response to identified gaps in the LAEP methodology regarding local level input, Oldham Council has embraced CLEP, which splits the published LAEP into different wards to test the LAEP against reality. This approach seeks to bridge the disconnect between top-down energy strategies and bottom-up local community needs, creating plans that are both realistic and reflective of local aspirations. This method enables communities to engage with the insights generated by the LAEP and use them to identify local priorities and projects. The local authority described this as *“taking the relevant slice of the LAEP, showing it to the community with the overarching question of ‘Here’s what the LAEP says - do you think that’s right?’”* In practice, this has been seen to lead to a focus on identifying the projects that align with community preferences.

This approach was trialled through the two-year Oldham Energy Futures pilot project in Westwood and Sholver. The two CLEPs that have been created through this pilot were developed through significant engagement with local residents and community groups. Workshops enabled communities to scrutinise LAEP recommendations through looking at the outputs and exploring what is both possible and desirable. As well as developing the plan, this process has had a positive lasting impact on both areas - with local low-carbon projects and groups continuing after the end of the pilot. This has resulted in the ongoing wider benefit of raising community awareness of the energy transition and acting as a catalyst for local level action.

The CLEP process aims to prioritise projects that align with community preferences, providing confidence to investors and local authorities that the projects in these plans will be supported to go ahead. Due to the success of the trial, Oldham Council is now looking to develop this method further, with an overall goal of having a CLEP for every ward.

While external investment is seen as one way of helping to bring forward the projects identified in the CLEP, the potential for town planning to act as a catalyst for bringing forward these plans is currently unknown. It was initially hoped that the plans could become SPDs. In particular, the local authority energy team feel that the CLEPs should carry more weight than the LAEP as they involve significant local input. However, the local authority town planning department identified that making the published plans into SPDs would potentially involve re-starting the process, as SPDs need to consider town planning policy and involve the local authority town planning team explicitly from the start, which the current CLEPs did not.

There is also a potential that the CLEPs could provide the evidence base for a neighbourhood plan. However, that would involve another process for establishing a neighbourhood planning group and preparing a neighbourhood plan, which is wider than just energy. The question thus remains about the potential to give these plans weight within the town planning system.

## 7. Future directions

Oldham Council has notable further potential to integrate energy and town planning to achieve its long-term decarbonisation goals. Two areas of focus for Oldham Council in the near future are exploring the potential for the onshore wind energy study and progressing further CLEPs – including considering how they can be done in a more streamlined and cost-effective way. A key element of this will be considering how the outcomes of community-led plans can feed into town planning policy.

## 8. Key recommendations from this case study

### 8.1 There is value in aligning LAEPs with local priorities and community needs through a bottom-up community-led approach

Oldham Council's use of CLEP provided valuable feedback on the limitations of the LAEP methodology, particularly its failure to fully account for local community priorities. While LAEPs provide a broad strategic overview, they often miss nuanced community needs, which can create challenges when it comes to real-world implementation. An approach such as CLEP can ensure that the projects that are prioritised within a local area reflect local needs. However, consideration needs to be given to how to ensure that such plans are cost effective and can input into town planning policy.

### 8.2 There is a need for clearer pathways for translating energy plans into town planning policy

The Oldham case study underscores the challenge of translating LAEP outputs into enforceable town planning policies. While LAEPs can serve as valuable evidence, the lack of statutory weight limits their impact on town planning decisions, hence the local plan only refers to the existence of the LAEP. There are challenges in working out how to incorporate the CLEP into town planning policy.

### 8.3 Missed opportunities can occur when the LAEP process is slightly removed from the local authority expert

In this case study, the local authority team were not very involved in the LAEP process, with a key limitation being the missed opportunity to identify areas for onshore wind and arguably also for electric charger locations. There would be value in ensuring that local authorities, and particularly local authority planners, have the resources and support to be able to participate more actively in studies that are being undertaken by external consultants.





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