POLICY BRIEFING

# Planning for energy

## Challenges and solutions for local authority skills and resourcing

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Created for Innovate UK Net Zero Living programme by Regen

# About Net Zero Living

**This briefing has been funded by Innovate UK as part of the Net Zero Living Thriving Places programme.**

Net Zero Living (NZL) is a programme run by Innovate UK. The programme supports local authorities, their partners and communities to overcome non-technical systemic barriers to scaling up and adopting net zero solutions. Within the programme are 52 local authorities – the NZL participants – are at various stages in developing and delivering their local net zero plans.

This report was written by Regen, who provides expert support on policy and regulation to the NZL programme. It was informed by NZL participant contributions to a webinar in April 2025.

# About Regen

Regen provides independent, evidence-led insight and advice in support of our mission to transform the UK's energy system for a net zero future. We focus on analysing the systemic challenges of decarbonising power, heat and transport. We know that a transformation of this scale will require engaging the whole of society in a just transition.

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# Executive summary

Planning is a critical enabler of the UK's transition to net zero. Without well-resourced, skilled local planning authorities (LPAs), the deployment of renewable energy infrastructure will fall behind the pace required. To help meet national targets, LPAs must have enough planners in place, equipped with the specific expertise needed to support a rapidly evolving energy system.

Across the Net Zero Living (NZL) programme, local authorities are already demonstrating practical, innovative ways to address these challenges. From shared ecology services and energy planning collaborations to new training initiatives and regional planning hubs, real progress is being made.

Yet these positive examples remain uneven and often rely on local champions and limited resources. A key question now arises: how could we achieve more consistent models and targeted support to help scale and replicate these solutions more widely?

This insight draws on insights from developers and planners, particularly focusing on examples from NZL programme participants and showcases the work already underway. It explores where further support could unlock capacity, accelerate deployment, and provide a more resilient planning system for net zero. Key opportunities explored include:

- Expanding shared specialist services across LPAs, including expertise in renewable energy
- Investing in regional planning hubs to coordinate and build capacity for net zero planning
- Creating clearer routes for planners to specialise in net zero and renewable energy
- Delivering structured, up-to-date training to ensure all planners are confident in assessing energy-related applications.

With Clean Power 2030 and broader net zero ambitions placing growing demands on planning, there is an urgent need to move from reactive solutions to a more strategic and supported model. The building blocks are already in place; this is a moment to scale what works.

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# Introduction and the scale of the problem

Planning is central to delivering the UK's net zero and clean power ambitions. Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) are on the frontline of this effort, yet many lack the capacity and specialist expertise needed to keep pace with the growing volume and complexity of renewable energy applications.

This policy insight was developed in response to mounting concerns from both local authority planners and renewable energy stakeholders about resourcing and skills pressures within LPAs. These concerns were the focus of an April 2025 Net Zero Living (NZL) webinar, where participants from across the UK shared their experiences.

When asked about the biggest challenges in planning and consenting energy infrastructure, the most common response was a lack of specialist knowledge within local planning teams. This was closely followed by challenges in recruiting and retaining planners with the right skills - issues that are already leading to delays and bottlenecks in the planning system.

Years of budget cuts, the departure of experienced staff and limited opportunities for training and career progression have left many planning departments overstretched. Planners are being asked to do more with less, and renewable energy and energy storage applications are suffering as a result, causing frustration for developers, planners and communities alike.

If these issues go unaddressed, they risk becoming a significant barrier to the UK's renewable energy rollout. Building a planning system that is equipped with the right resources, expertise and support is not optional; it is essential to achieving the UK's net zero goals.

Against this backdrop, the following sections explore the specific challenges facing LPAs in more detail, starting with the immediate pressures around recruitment, retention and capacity. While these issues are not unique to energy planning, they are already having a direct and detrimental impact on the UK's ability to deliver renewable energy projects at pace.

## The scale of resourcing challenges

LPA's are facing severe resourcing pressures. UK government data shows that:

- Approximately 91% of planning departments reported some difficulties with recruitment
- Around 72% of planning departments struggle with staff retention
- Workload, working conditions and career progression are impacting the sector.

### Evidence from the Net Zero Living online session

- **Recruitment and retention challenges:** Local authority participants highlighted difficulties in recruiting and retaining planning staff. High turnover and the departure of experienced planners are significantly impacting LPAs' capacity to manage planning applications effectively.

- **Prevalence of resourcing issues**: Out of 15 respondents, 11 indicated that resourcing challenges are somewhat affecting their local authority's ability to manage planning applications. Only two respondents reported no impact.

With the Clean Power 2030 agenda placing urgent emphasis on accelerating renewable energy deployment, there is a critical window of opportunity to address these challenges. Energy and storage projects are frequently delayed, with extension of time requests becoming the norm rather than the exception. Addressing these bottlenecks now is essential for meeting the UK's clean energy targets.

### Resourcing challenges facing statutory consultees

Statutory consultees play a vital role in the planning process for renewable energy infrastructure, providing expert advice to ensure decisions are robust, legally compliant and environmentally sustainable.

However, many of these bodies are themselves facing significant resourcing pressures. Local authorities report frequent delays in receiving responses from consultees, largely due to understaffing and rising caseloads. These hold-ups not only extend planning timelines and create uncertainty for developers but also place additional strain on local authority planners who depend on timely input to move applications forward.

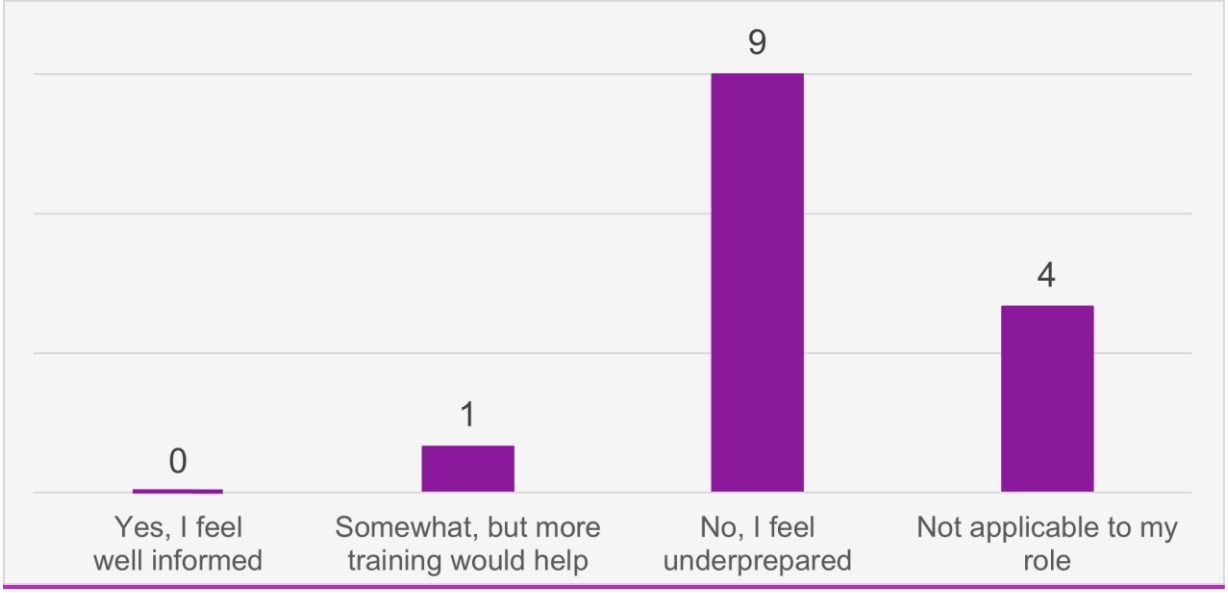
Without adequate capacity and technical expertise, statutory consultees may struggle to participate effectively, contributing to systemic bottlenecks. Addressing these pressures across the entire planning ecosystem is essential. A more coordinated approach to resourcing, one that includes statutory consultees alongside LPAs, would help improve efficiency and support the timely delivery of renewable energy infrastructure.

## Skills and knowledge gaps

In addition to staffing shortages, we have heard from many LPA's that there is a growing skills gap for planners in understanding the renewable energy sector. The rapid evolution of the energy sector means that many local authority planners lack up-to-date knowledge of renewable energy technologies, grid infrastructure and recent policy changes. This can hinder:

- Project decision-making, leading to delays or inconsistencies
- Local plan development, where energy considerations are not fully understood or integrated.

**Net Zero living webinar participants' response to the question: Do you feel you have received enough training to effectively plan for and make decisions on renewable energy development?**



### Evidence from the Net Zero Living online session

- **Pace of policy change**: Participants highlighted that the rapid evolution of national and regional energy policy presents a major challenge. Local authority teams often struggle to keep up with changing requirements and guidance, placing additional strain on already stretched resources.

- **Limited opportunities for specialisation**: Many planners are expected to cover a wide breadth of knowledge, managing diverse application types with minimal opportunity to specialise in areas like renewable energy. Some participants linked this to staff attrition, noting that planners often leave in search of roles where they can focus and develop deeper expertise.

- **Developing ambitious local policies**: Participants reported that creating robust, forward-looking local policies to support renewable energy deployment can be difficult, particularly without adequate support or access to best practice examples.

- **Growing complexity of energy planning**: LPAs are now handling a broader range of application types, including heat networks, energy centres and related infrastructure. This is especially relevant in the context of emerging heat network zoning.

# Addressing skills and knowledge gaps: Upskilling local authority planners in the energy sector

Local authority planners have regularly highlighted the need for greater knowledge and training in the energy system. Understanding the full picture, from key terminology and the role of grid connections to how energy plans are impacting the sector, is crucial for effective planning. A broader perspective on the energy transition will enable planners to make informed decisions that align with national and regional energy strategies.

## Potential for renewable energy training for all LPA's

A proposal explored in the webinar session was the introduction of a structured training programme for local authority planners. It was discussed that this programme could:

- Be offered free of charge to all LPAs, with potential regional differentiation
- Cover key developments in the energy sector, including Local Area Energy Plans and wider net zero planning, Clean Power 2030, Regional Energy Strategic Plans (RESPs) and the Strategic Spatial Energy Plan (SSEP), and their implications for planning
- Be delivered by independent energy experts in collaboration with a national planning body, providing planners with direct access to specialist knowledge and opportunities for Q&A
- Be supported by comprehensive resources, ensuring planners have ongoing reference materials after the training
- Include practical guidance on planning for renewables, battery storage, grid infrastructure and heat networks
- Be delivered online, making it accessible to all LPAs and potentially updated annually to reflect policy and technological changes.

**Evidence from the net zero living online session**

- **Upskilling planning teams**: There was broad agreement that all members of planning departments should be confident in assessing renewable and low-carbon energy applications. This includes understanding relevant technologies, policy frameworks and the specific planning considerations associated with energy infrastructure.

- **Widening the scope of upskilling**: Participants suggested that training and skills development should also extend to energy policy teams, who increasingly work alongside planners to shape local development strategies and support net zero objectives. This cross-departmental understanding is crucial for delivering joined-up approaches. Therefore, such teams should be upskilled in the planning sector.

- **Beyond renewables:** Participants highlighted the need for planning teams to build capacity in related areas, including energy demand reduction, climate adaptation and the integration of new technologies such as storage and heat networks.

# Addressing resourcing challenges: renewable energy planning specialists

To meet the scale of renewable energy deployment envisioned under the Clean Power 2030 agenda, local authorities need not only more planners, but also the right kind of expertise.

While long-term efforts to grow the planning workforce are essential, there is also an urgent short-term need to boost specialist capacity within the system. One solution presented by Regen during the Net Zero Living workshop was the creation of renewable energy planning specialists, dedicated roles focused on supporting energy and storage applications across multiple LPAs.

These specialist planners could work at a regional level or through shared-service arrangements, providing targeted expertise where it is needed most. This approach offers a way to relieve pressure on generalist planning teams while building confidence and consistency in the handling of complex energy applications.

## Potential role of renewable energy specialist planners

Renewable energy specialist planners could play a key role in relieving pressure on overstretched planning teams and accelerating the delivery of clean energy projects. Their responsibilities could include:

- Leading pre-application discussions for renewable and storage projects
- Assessing applications and managing post-consent processes, such as discharging conditions
- Supporting local authority input into Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs)
- Contributing to a centralised resource hub to address sector-wide challenges and ensure consistency
- Reporting planning data and bottlenecks to the UK government's Clean Power Unit.

This model aligns with the Welsh government's proposals advocating for shared-service arrangements to improve efficiency and expertise across planning departments.

It also addresses a concern raised by NZL participants: many planners are interested in specialising in energy but currently lack the opportunity. Introducing

these roles could provide a clear professional pathway, with specialism, recognition, and progression. However, these specialist positions must complement, not replace, broader efforts to upskill all local authority planners.

**Example of the Welsh government's proposals**

The Welsh government's consultation on "promoting a resilient and high-performing planning system in Wales" set out the following proposals:

- Shared-service delivery models, where specialist disciplines sit across several LPAs and provide technical expertise and strategic coordination, helping to streamline decision making and address capacity gaps in overstretched planning departments
- Planning skills hubs, which could act as a means for LPAs to quickly and easily access a variety of special and technical skills to support their staff.

## Recruitment considerations

To avoid deepening existing workforce pressures, it was felt that these specialist roles should be additional rather than substituting current LPA staff.

One potential short-term solution that was discussed was to enable private sector planners to be seconded into these roles on a fixed-term basis, ensuring access to expertise without adding to the long-term recruitment challenges. These proposals would then need to come alongside wider reforms to address LPA funding and recruitment challenges (discussed below), to enable local authority planners to specialise in such roles.

## A regionally specific approach

The types and volumes of renewable energy applications will vary significantly across the UK. Therefore, there would need to be a place-based, data-informed approach to deploying specialist planners. Options for hosting these roles include:

- Within net zero hubs (e.g. a funded planning hub hosted by a local authority to support its wider region)
- Within combined or new strategic authorities, to provide regional coordination and expertise.

Analysis of expected renewable energy application trends, such as those identified in Clean Power 2030 (CP30), could help determine which local authorities will see the greatest increase in energy and storage applications and therefore allocate specialist support based on expected needs.

### Evidence from the Net Zero Living online session

- **Need for place-based solutions:** The discussion reinforced the importance of data-driven, localised approaches. Each local authority faces different challenges based on geography, development pressures and energy resource potential. Therefore, a regional approach would be important.

- **Variation in expertise by project type**: The type of renewable energy projects being submitted also affects the level of challenges in each area, particularly noting differences in rural and urban local authorities.

- **Self-organising approaches**: As planning needs vary across local authority areas, participants suggested that cross-authority collaboration could emerge organically. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model, authorities can tailor shared service arrangements to suit local contexts and demands.

## Long-term recruitment of planners

Alongside the creation of specialist renewable energy planners and support to fill the immediate challenge of delays in the planning system for renewable energy applications, there is also a need to ensure that we have a strong pipeline of new planners coming into the profession. Ideas for achieving this included:

- Increasing the number of planners the government has committed to hiring beyond the 300 that have been promised
- Reviewing pay and workloads to make the profession more attractive
- Exploring opportunities such as increasing local authority degree apprenticeships. Apprenticeships can serve as valuable pathways into the profession for diverse groups, including mid-career professionals seeking a career change.

# Examples from the Net Zero Living online session: Skills sharing and cross-authority expertise

When considering future specialist approaches, it is essential to recognise and build upon the progress local authorities have already made in this area. Webinar participants highlighted various ways local authorities currently collaborate to tackle skills shortages, notably by sharing expertise and resources in specialist fields such as ecology, biodiversity and major infrastructure.

NZL participants emphasised that the effectiveness of shared services depends on trust in the impartiality of the advice given. To foster this trust, transparency, strong governance and professional independence are critical components for establishing confidence in these collaborative models.

The following case studies illustrate practical examples of how local authorities are already working together to overcome resourcing and skills challenges:

**Service-level agreements for specialist advice**

- Smaller authorities that lack in-house expertise often enter service-level agreements with larger councils to access non-statutory advice (e.g. ecology, landscape, or heritage). This flexible arrangement helps ensure consistency in decision-making while managing cost and capacity.

**Specialist ecology services through collaboration**:

- Brighton & Hove pays a fee to access statutory ecological advice from the county ecologist at East Sussex County Council. This model enables the LPA to benefit from high-quality specialist input without needing in-house expertise.
- The Greater Manchester Ecology Unit (GMEU) provides ecology advice across all 10 local authorities in Greater Manchester, as well as to local planning authorities in Warrington and Lancashire. It stands as a strong example of effective resource pooling and shared technical capacity. As well as providing advice on planning applications, GMEU manages the Sites of Biological Importance register, which records and updates data on biodiversity in the region to inform planning decisions. GMEU also supports applicants and consultants to apply the biodiversity net gain metric to projects and advises on the suitability of on- or off-site habitat creation plans.

**Joint planning for major infrastructure projects:**

- The application process for the Rampion Offshore Wind Farm extension involved multiple coastal local authorities. One authority took the lead, coordinating input from others and managing joint consultation. This collaborative model worked effectively for a complex, cross-boundary application and could serve as a blueprint for similar projects.

**Shared approaches to biodiversity and nature recovery:**

- All local authorities across England are involved in developing and delivering Local Nature Recovery Strategies, either as a responsible authority (usually a county or combined authority) or a supporting authority. These forums provide a foundation for coordinating approaches to implementing Biodiversity Net Gain and aligning policies across boundaries. More consistent approaches are helpful for developers engaging with multiple planning authorities.

- The West of England Mayoral Combined Authority led the development of a local nature recovery strategy with support from Bath & North East Somerset Council, Bristol Council, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset Council. Together, they have produced an interactive toolkit and map showing areas suitable for off-site biodiversity net gain measures across the region. This can help developers plan projects to maximise benefits for nature and provide evidence to support officers assessing planning applications.

**North Wales shared service model**:

- North Wales Waste and Minerals Planning Shared Service was identified as an example of successful regional collaboration. It demonstrates how a shared model can deliver trusted, high-quality advice across local authorities while maintaining a degree of perceived independence and professional integrity.
- The service was set up by seven relatively small local planning authorities with limited expertise on minerals and waste. It gives advice and recommendations on planning applications to the local planning authorities for a fee, as well as pre-application advice for developers, site monitoring and enforcement, which generate additional income.
- The service provides an opportunity for career progression and specialisation, which has helped attract experienced and skilled staff.

# Conclusion

Across the Net Zero Living programme and beyond, the examples set out in this paper highlight how local areas are already taking practical and innovative steps to address the planning challenges associated with the transition to net zero.

To meet our clean power goals, it is essential that these efforts not only inspire but also inform a more consistent and strategic approach to upskilling and supporting planners across local authorities.

Empowering planners with the right knowledge, tools and support, as well as increasing the overall number of planners within local authorities, will be critical in turning ambition into delivery and accelerating progress towards meeting our renewable energy targets.