

No.7 Greatest Hits for Planning and New Development**Brief Description:**

The purpose of the planning system is to deliver sustainable communities. It is therefore a key mechanism for delivering low carbon elements of the Sustainable Communities Strategy, including new development in sustainable locations, housing that is affordable to run in terms of energy needs, health in terms of promoting active travel and access to open spaces and leisure and economic investment.

National changes to the planning system over the last few years have sustainability at their core, and most councils are incorporating these changes into local policies and plans. Local council priorities have a strong influence on the speed at which these national policies are translated into action. There are major differences in progress between local planning authorities and opportunities for integrated renewable energy in particular may be lost.

Planning is essentially about balancing different pressures from different directions, and considering sustainability in terms of economic and social improvement as well as environmental considerations. The fear of upsetting the business community or losing new development to other areas is a major influence. Using hard policy to drive up standards requires facing down well-resourced business interests, which may be highly risky, leading to policy documents being found unsound, planning decisions overturned and attitudes being hardened by the confrontational approach. This does not negate the need to press for higher standards. Well-informed pressure, supported by evidence and rooted in a clear community view strengthens the ability of Local Planning authorities to introduce and implement more demanding policies.

A low-carbon planning system will not deliver short term NI 186 targets, as the level of construction expected before 2011 is too low, but it is critical to delivery of this target over the long term, and action on planning is expected to be included in all NI186 plans.

Category:

The actions proposed impact the Industry/Commercial, Domestic and Transport categories of Defra's CO₂ emissions category.

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Partners:

The Local Planning Authority is the main group responsible for achieving low carbon developments, but they should be supported by:

- The Economic Development team
- The Local Transport Authority and Highways Agency
- The Health sector
- Key local developers

Organisations such as the Town and Country Planning Association¹ and the Planning Advisory Service² also provide valuable information on good practice.

Planning Policy

Councils produce a suite of local planning documents that are collectively known as a Local Development Framework or LDF. This sets out the Council's overall vision for the area and the policies and proposals to achieve it both by influencing planning decisions in the area and by wider spatial planning. The LDF system is new: many are currently being written, giving the opportunity to ensure that sustainability elements are included. Most LDF documents must be subject to a process of Sustainability Appraisal.

The Core Strategy is the key document on which all other documents hang, and policies contained within the Core Strategy are supported by more detailed Development Plan Documents. The Core Strategy should:

- Maximise the scope for renewable energy and sustainable buildings
- Plan for renewable energy infrastructure such as district heating networks
- Reduce the need to travel and maximise the opportunities to encourage walking, cycling and use of public transport
- Plan to adapt to climate change covering issues such as infrastructure, flood risk and biodiversity.

Local Planning Authorities have a degree of flexibility in the extent to which they can require higher standards for sustainable developments, which can be introduced in Local Development Documents.

Key Planning Policy Documents:

Local Development Documents must conform to national and regional planning policies produced by the Secretary of State. Amongst other things, these documents set out what must be included in Local Development Documents, and where there is flexibility to require higher standards. Key documents related to sustainability include;

- PPS1: Delivering Sustainable Development³
- Supplement to PPS1: Planning and Climate Change
- PPG13: Transport⁴
- PPS22: Renewable Energy⁵
- NW Regional Spatial Strategy and forthcoming Regional Strategy⁶

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Fact Box

The Regional Spatial Strategy contains many requirements relating to climate change, including that:

- Targets for the % of low carbon and decentralised energy in new developments must be specified in Development Plan Documents; and
- Where these are not yet in place, new non-residential development of 1,000m² or more, and new residential developments of 10 or more dwellings should secure at least 10% of their predicted energy requirements from decentralised or low-carbon sources.

So no new large development application should be passed without integral low carbon energy supply, unless there is compelling evidence that it is not feasible.

Key steps to getting started as a Partnership

1. Understanding how Planning can help achieve the target
2. Finding out what is happening already
3. Identifying priority areas for short – medium term action

1. Understanding how Planning can help achieve the target

In the relatively short timescale of the first target period, improvements made through changes to the planning system will have very limited impact. However, it is only by putting in place the structure for low carbon development that there will be any chance of hitting the national target for 2050.

The sections below explain what can be done through planning to create low carbon, sustainable communities.

Planning for Decentralised and Low Carbon Energy

Once a site is developed it is difficult to radically change the amount of energy it uses. There is a risk that development can 'lock-in' high carbon emissions. Getting the energy supply approach right before a site is developed can lock in low carbon energy for a very long time. Some areas are developing Energy Plans to tackle this. These detail the most suitable renewable energy technologies for that area, outline potential locations for large-scale projects such as district heating, wind farms or energy-from-waste schemes and consider the processes and policies required to encourage investment in these options.

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Case Study – Knowsley Council

Knowsley Council has recently commissioned a study of renewable energy potential across the Borough. This will look at the environmental and economic benefits and constraints of a range of low carbon energy supply technologies, and identify the most appropriate and cost-effective options for suitable sites. It will also consider the potential for local jobs and skills development as well as the economic benefit to business and homes through lower energy costs. The information will feed into the development of their LDF.

Some planning authorities have included conditions requiring the developer to set up an Energy Services Company (ESCO)⁷ to ensure the long term provision of decentralised energy for a site, incorporating conditions on future energy costs.

Technologies such as solar and PV panels are considered permitted development in most areas. Where this is not the case, for example in a Conservation Area, there is scope to allow these through local policies.

Planning for Low Carbon Buildings

Planners have a duty to make sufficient affordable housing available in their area. Good planning can also help ensure that all homes are affordable to run over the long term. All aspects of sustainability including highly efficient buildings, on-site renewable energy and accessibility by walking and cycling contribute to lower costs of living for residents.

Local Planning Authorities may set standards for low carbon buildings that are more stringent than the building regulations in force at the time. Generally these should be specific to a development area or site where the need can be evidenced, and should be based on existing standards, such as the Code for Sustainable Homes or BREEAM ratings. A number of planning authorities (such as the London Borough of Merton and Greenwich) have included requirements to monitor the emissions performance of completed developments in their development plan documents.

Case Study – Manchester City Council

In their Supplementary Planning Document (April 2007), Manchester City Council state that developers should reduce CO₂ emissions by at least 25% from the current building regulations, and should install at least 20% on-site renewable energy. Non-residential developments should achieve at least BREEAM Very Good.

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Planning and Sustainable Transport

Reducing the need to travel through mixed-use developments and sensible siting, and the provision of good quality alternatives such as walking and cycling routes and bus services can all be achieved through the planning process. Planning authorities are required to ensure that jobs, shopping, leisure and services are accessible by public transport, walking and cycling. They must also ensure that the LDF and the Local Transport Plan are consistent⁸ – see CLASP [Briefing No.5](#) Greatest Hits for Transport.

Planning and Health

National Institute for Clinical Excellence evidence demonstrates a clear link between improvements in the physical and natural environment and the health of the population. Their Guidelines⁹ cover many of the same issues as PPS1, but their recommendations go beyond these requirements in some cases, for example, re-allocating road space to physically active forms of transport and restricting motor vehicle access, but also ensuring that staircases are designed and positioned to encourage people to use them. Consultation between health professionals and planners at the early stages of a development can help to implement these recommendations and will help to achieve LAA targets in Health and Wellbeing as well as climate change.

Planning and Economic Development

A low carbon economy is one that has resources available for investment in growth in the longer term, although promoting sustainable economic development is not the same as promoting economic growth. Planning a renewable energy infrastructure and transport alternatives as part of new economic development will have higher up-front costs but will contribute to development through improved communities, transport and ultimately better places to attract new business to and do business in.

Supporting Carbon Reductions in the Existing Stock

While planning is usually about new developments, there are opportunities to influence the emissions of the existing building stock, 75% of which will still be in use in 2050. This can be achieved by;

- Exploring the potential for new developments to expand decentralised energy generation to neighbouring buildings
- Including upgrading of existing properties in regeneration zones
- Relaxing restrictions on small-scale renewables in areas where these are not classed as permitted developments
- Providing information and assistance on low carbon refurbishments for applicants for extensions or conversions of existing properties.

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2. Finding out what is happening already

Planning Policy Framework

Speak to your planning team to find out what is already happening - most will be making progress on this, and there may be little more to do than record these actions and plans.

- Does your Local Development Framework, particularly the Core Strategy, specifically reference climate change and encourage low carbon developments?
- Do you have Local Development Documents that spell out your requirements on energy performance, renewable and low carbon energy, sustainable transport etc.?
- Have you mapped the heat demand and existing heat infrastructure and identified target areas suitable for decentralised energy?
- Are new developments planned that would be particularly suitable for district heating?
- Are there development areas where you can require more stringent energy performance and sustainability standards?
- How well is sustainable transport integrated into development policies?
- Have you considered extending permitted development for building-integrated renewable energy?

Ideally, Sustainability officers should be involved in the sustainability appraisal process for the LDF documents.

Planning Applications

If your LDF sufficiently covers sustainable and low carbon development, how well is this being translated into planning applications? The key to this is communicating clearly with developers long before an application is made, to make sure they understand the requirements, and being open to ongoing discussions with developers as to the best way to achieve these requirements. Most planning departments welcome pre-application discussions and these are encouraged in PPS1. Most developers are also used to dealing with the Code for Sustainable Homes(CSH)¹⁰, BREEAM ratings¹¹, Energy Performance Certificates and renewable energy, and are happy to accommodate them provided they know what is expected.

Your planning team may need training on some of the renewable energy technologies or you may need to get specialist help to assess whether the plans meet your criteria. However, where standard systems are used, such as CSH or BREEAM, the certification processes for these should be sufficient.

Where applications are being developed that will be significantly lower-carbon than the current standards, these can be included in your NI186 Action Plan.

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Case Study – Lancaster University

Lancaster University now boasts BREEAM Excellent Accommodation for students. Timber frames were manufactured offsite in order to minimise waste, and a range of energy and water saving technologies reduced the accommodation's carbon footprint by 30%. Students are able to monitor their own utility consumption and competition to have the lowest bills has already started to show even greater savings. Mark Swindlehurst, Lancaster University's director of estate management, adds: "This new, eco-friendly accommodation is designed and built more sustainably, it is cheaper to build than conventional construction methods resulting in lower rents to students and it will use less energy in operation. We're proud to be setting this standard for future best practice."

Planning Conditions

It is usual for competing priorities to be traded off against each other during the development of an application, particularly where affordable housing or economic growth are key drivers for the development. The temptation is to knock off items seen as extras, such as renewable energy, to reduce costs. However, local authorities that have consistently stood firm on these, even at the risk of the developer going elsewhere, report that they are seeing a noticeable improvement in the quality of applications as a result.

Case Study – Story Group

Cumbrian developer Story Group are planning a 900-home urban extension site in Carlisle, which will achieve minimum CSH Level 4 and is the first large scale scheme in Cumbria to reach this standard. Story anticipates that by positioning itself at the forefront of sustainable development, they can benefit from buyers' increasing awareness of environmental matters and gain a commercial advantage in the new housing market.

Chief Executive Fred Story sees this approach as essential. "Story Group recognise that outstanding environmental credentials are an essential requirement of the planning process and our aspiration to achieve minimum CSH Level 4, whilst not a specific planning requirement, is attractive to key stakeholders who have responsibilities for safeguarding our environment. To achieve these high standards, our portfolio of homes has been redesigned to integrate sustainable technologies and ensure our products remain distinct and visually attractive to buyers. We will be promoting the sustainable features of our properties and advising prospective purchasers of the reduced operating costs and increased comfort these features will offer them."

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Planning Committee

If applications are being submitted for low carbon developments or renewable energy installations, are these being passed by your Planning Committee? You may need to consider accessing training for your Planning Committee to make sure they are up to date with all the sustainability requirements and technologies being proposed.

If sustainability or renewable energy requirements are being regularly overturned at Planning Committee, it is worth identifying the reasons or major barriers, such as heritage or landscape, to provide recommended alternatives. It is also important that they fully recognise the planning role in delivering much wider benefits to the community.

Development Control

Finally, if low carbon developments applications are passed, are they being built to the required standard? For most developments, changes are made throughout the construction process, and it is here that planned carbon savings can be lost.

So how do you assess whether the development meets the specification? Whilst post-completion certification through CSH or BREEAM will show up deficiencies, Development Control officers need to be familiar with the technologies and techniques used in low carbon buildings to help prevent problems arising.

Planning conditions can also be applied to ensure, for example, that energy use or renewable energy output is monitored for a certain period once the buildings are occupied.

3. Identifying priority areas for short – medium term action

a) Where actions are happening

i) Ensure that those responsible for reporting on NI 186 are kept informed of progress in low carbon planning policies, and of developments where these policies will make a significant impact on CO₂ emissions. Make sure wider LSP and elected members are also aware of how the planning policies are supporting NI186 targets.

ii) Ensure that planning officers, transport engineers and travel planning staff work together to integrate low carbon transport infrastructure as well as reducing barriers to softer transport measures.

iii) Develop links between health professionals and planning staff to ensure that the opportunities for regular physical activity are built into developments and infrastructure.

iv) Develop links with developers to promote planning policy and to create best practice examples.

v) As part of the ongoing public consultation on planning policies, make sure the local community are aware of how these will contribute to a sustainable and better quality of life. For micro-renewables in particular, publicise the technologies that can be installed without planning permission.

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b) Where a sustainable planning approach is not developed

Use the actions listed above as a framework for change – these actions need to be put in place, starting with the right policies. It is really important to get support for sustainable development in planning from the LSP and the Local Authority senior managers, and those involved in the whole planning chain.

c) Quick Wins

(i) Find out which new developments are currently being planned, particularly large ones and talk to the Planners and Planning Committee members;

- Have high levels of sustainability been included?
- Is renewable energy included to at least 10%, and are there opportunities to increase this?
- Has district heating been considered, and are there opportunities for putting in a district heating network that could later be expanded to neighbouring areas?
- Has the development been planned around cycling and walking? Are there opportunities to expand these to neighbouring areas?
- Are there opportunities to require travel plans that also include neighbouring homes or employers?

(ii) Talk to staff who deal with extensions and conversions, especially those who answer early queries from the public;

- Do they routinely recommend energy efficiency improvements to the building or to consider renewable energy while other work is going on?
- Are they able to quickly advise on whether planning permission is needed for small-scale renewable energy such as solar panels?

Case Study - Lancaster City Council

If you ring Lancaster City Council's Planning office to ask whether planning permission is needed for renewable energy, such as solar panels, whoever answers the phone will be able to tell you straight away.

(iii) Find out where land has been allocated for development and talk to the Forward Planning Team;

- Can any of these areas be designated for Flagship zero carbon developments?
- What needs to be done to put this in place?

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And Finally...

There are some common misuses of terms that can cause confusion for developers, so make sure your planning team know the difference between, for example;

- Solar PV (generates electricity) and solar thermal (generates heat)
- District Heating (a system of underground heat to provide heat for several buildings in an area) and CHP (a system that generates both heat and power, and can be used in a single building as well as in a district heating network)
- Renewable energy (uses the wind, sun or water power with no need for other energy sources) and low carbon energy (more efficient ways of extracting energy, but still have ongoing carbon emissions in use e.g. heat pumps, biomass, CHP, nuclear).

The Northwest Greatest Hits for NI 186 series includes the following briefings:

- 1** No.1 Greatest Hits for Unitary LSPs
- 2** No.2 Greatest Hits for District LSPs
- 3** No.3 Your Top 10 is my Top 10 –
Explaining how climate change targets meet other targets
- 4** No.4 Quantifying the Savings
- 5** No. 5 Greatest Hits for Low Carbon Economic Development
- 6** No.6 Greatest Hits for Engaging with Business
- 7** No.7 Greatest Hits in Planning
- 8** No. 8 Greatest Hits for Local Transport Plans
- 9** No. 9 Greatest Hits for Revolving Loan Funds
- 10** No.10 The Whole NI 186 Picture

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CLASP – The Northwest Climate Change Local Area Support Programme
www.clasp-nw.info