locality

the power of community

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Greening your asset and beyond

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Greening your asset and beyond

The climate crisis looms large in many people's minds, having been described as the 'defining crisis of our time' by the United Nations (United Nations, 2025). With such a large, intractable issue, it is hard to know where to start or understand how each of us can make a difference. But there are lots of practical steps you can take to reduce your asset and organisation's carbon footprint, whilst contributing to co-benefits such as cost-savings, community education, cohesion and empowerment.

Policy context

The 2023 Climate Change Committee report outlined that buildings remain the UK's second-highest carbon-emitting sector, accounting for 76 MtCO2e, or 17%, of total UK operational emissions in 2022 (Climate Change Committee, 2023).

> "Around one quarter of the UK's building stock is at least 100 years old. These buildings can and must adapt, not only to support the transition to a Net Zero society but also to improve energy/cost-efficiency and thermal comfort for

> occupants, and to ensure they remain safe, desirable and viable assets for future generations to enjoy" (Historic England, 2024)

Research by Social Investment Business Group shows that over 7,300 community buildings in England do not meet basic energy efficiency standards. Improvements to the energy efficiency of community buildings is lagging behind other non-domestic buildings, and Northern regions of England have the highest proportion of inefficient community buildings, with 60% having an EPC rating of D or less (Social Investment Business, 2024).

This is leaving the not-for-profit sector burdened with properties with higher energy bills and higher emissions that are at greater risk of regulatory non-compliance.

The 2008 Climate Act committed the UK to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and established legally binding carbon budgets. These five-year budgets establish the maximum level of net emissions the UK can produce, to help ensure the UK government meets its commitment to reaching net zero by 2050.

The Labour Government announced its plan to deliver 'Clean Power' by 2030, supported by the Great British Energy Act and its plan to establish a publicly owned company to accelerate investment in renewable energy (Burnett & Steward, 2025).

> "More than half of the emissions cuts needed rely on people and businesses taking up low-carbon solutions – decisions that are made at a local and individual level. Many of these decisions depend on having supporting infrastructure and systems in place. Local authorities have powers or influence over roughly a third of emissions in their local areas." (Climate Change Committee, 2020)

Many local authorities have declared climate emergencies and produced climate action plans. You can check your local authority's action plan at Climate Emergency UK, where they have produced a database assessing how much progress individual councils have made towards implementing these action plans. The assessment categories include buildings and heating, transport, planning and land use, governance and finance, biodiversity, waste reduction and food, and collaboration and engagement.

Despite this traction and increasingly supportive policy environment there is also considerable headwind. Net Zero is becoming a political battleground and totemic issue, with our established political consensus in favour of climate action, beginning to show signs of fracture. It has been described by those who seek to weaponise it as "the next Brexit" (Financial Times, 2025) - the cause around which popular discontent with mainstream politics can coalesce and find powerful political expression.

Community assets present a tangible opportunity for climate action at a local level, contributing to their ability to galvanise people-power and transform communities, but the direction of future policy remains uncertain.

Getting started: energy and carbon audits

Robust information and data from surveys enable design, planning and management actions that relate to specific opportunities and constraints, as well as being central to establishing an accurate energy performance baseline.

Building condition, maintenance and structural surveys will provide critical information about the fabric and health of the asset. But it's worth noting that you don't need professional surveys to get started. Locality has produced a checklist of 'quick wins' to identify low-cost actions that can cut energy bills, reduce carbon emissions and make buildings more comfortable for staff, volunteers and visitors.

A DIY walk-through such as the Centre of Sustainable Energy's Energy Survey will give you a good grasp on how the building operates and is used by occupants.

An energy survey or audit will tell you how energy is currently being used and managed. It should assess appliances, lighting, heating, water, ventilation, building fabric, insulation, energy supply, operational practices and organisational policy.

A carbon audit takes this data and calculates the carbon emissions for either an asset or a whole organisation. Carbon emissions are organised into three categories or scopes:

- Scope 1 – **Direct Emissions**: from on-site energy and other activities that are owned or controlled by organisations. These include emissions from combustion in boilers or furnaces, refrigerants, or from company vehicles.
- Scope 2 – **Indirect Emissions**: from purchased energy that's generated off-site, such as electricity.
- Scope 3 – **Indirect Chain Emissions**: that occur elsewhere in the supply chain, either upstream or downstream. This includes emissions from business travel, employee commuting, waste disposal, purchased and sold goods and services (including end-of-life treatment of sold products), transportation and distribution (of goods purchased and sold), and investments.

NatWest's Carbon Planner is a free resource which can be used to calculate your organisation's carbon output, set targets, and develop an action plan to reduce emissions, explore possible interventions, and develop internal policy and behaviour change around climate issues. It takes organisations through four practical steps to help them act: inform, diagnose, plan and deliver.

SME Climate Hub's Business Carbon Calculate is a similar free resource that assesses SMEs' Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions following the globally recognised Greenhouse Gas Protocol, through a user-friendly, simplified and automated interface.

Many groups, however, decide they want a more detailed analysis provided by a professional energy or carbon auditor. There are a wealth of providers offering energy and carbon audits, so it's important to have a good grasp on what you are looking for. You will be required to provide the auditor with a range of data sets, such as information about staff and volunteer business travel and commuting. This will in turn, require you to have mechanisms for collecting this data. Depending on the size of your organisation and the nature of your work, this may have a resource cost for you.

A good audit should include an outline of the organisation's energy baseline, and a detailed analysis of inefficiencies, with a clear understanding of the specifics of the building including fabric and use. It will have recommendations for interventions with estimated costs, impacts and payback periods (i.e., how many years' financial savings it will take to make back the cost of the intervention). A strong report would also include details about how the interventions will relate to and impact one another.

Energy: approaches and interventions

Taking a whole building approach improves the environmental performance of the building through holistic management. Technical interventions can vary from building to building but are often a combination of mitigation and adaptation. When multiple interventions are planned, it's important to understand how each of them will interact and operate together, to ensure that each measure does not unintentionally adversely affect another.

The Centre for Sustainable Energy has developed an energy hierarchy, providing the ideal order in which planned interventions should take place:

- reduce use,
- improve efficiency,
- consider clean energy.

This is a logical order designed to make sure you've taken the low-cost and behaviour-related interventions that help to build broader culture change, before having to spend money on bigger investments.

Energy saving

Starting with energy conservation and other low-cost measures will help to ensure that you are being as efficient as possible with your energy use.

Thinking about how the building is used and occupant behaviours in terms of water use, lighting, heating and electrical appliances may enable you to have some quick, easy wins. Energy monitors, which display your electricity (and gas) use, can be a great way of increasing engagement with the issue and a useful tool for supporting behaviour change. There are an increasing number of products on the market to support more localised control of lighting, heating and water, at the level of an

individual room or appliance, including those that work on timers and motion sensors.

Efficient lighting such as LEDs are more expensive than traditional bulbs but due to their extremely low energy consumption and longer life, are likely to save you money overall. Energy efficient appliances (A being the highest energy rating), programmable on/off timers, and energy saving settings on computers will also make a big contribution.

There are a range of water saving devices such as lower flow-, aerated- and flow regulator-taps, and dual-flush toilets and toilet hippos which conserve water in cisterns.

Building fabric

It's important to know which fabrics are involved in the asset's structure, as well as how they respond to heating and moisture. Different construction methods (such as cavity wall or solid stone) require different approaches to insulation.

Embodied carbon refers to the carbon involved in the extraction, processing and transportation of materials to site. As a basic rule, less-processed materials such as wood have less carbon than more-processed materials such as concrete. Reusing materials, however, reduces the environmental impact further.

Insulating the roof, floors and external walls; draught proofing windows, doors and skirting; double or secondary glazing; properly insulated boiler and pipework; fixing leaky taps and pipes; and thermal doors all provide opportunities to improve efficiencies and reduce energy loss.

Heating your building

After having improved your building's efficiencies and reduced energy loss, it is then time to review your heating system. It may be that new or improved heating controls, such as timers, programmers, and thermostatic radiator valves, are able to modernise and adapt your existing system. Heating only the spaces that are in use, for shorter periods - with either individual room heaters or smart heating systems that are app controlled - might be the most efficient approach.

It may also be the case that a more efficient boiler or alternative energy system, such as an air source heat pump or underfloor heating, is what is needed.

Renewable energy

Solar panels and wind turbines are probably what spring to mind when you think about renewable energy. But using a 'green' tariff also means your asset is fed by renewable energy and comes without the start-up costs.

For organisations who are interested in generating their own energy, wind power, hydro power, biomass, solar and heat pumps may be viable options - depending on the specifics of the asset.

More information on the energy hierarchy can be found in the **CSE's guide to energy efficiency in community buildings**, alongside their range of advice leaflets on the above interventions. The **five regional net zero hubs** (covering the North West, the North East and Yorkshire, the Midlands, the South West and the South East) also have resources and funding opportunities related to renewable energy and decarbonisation.

Considerations for historical buildings

Historic England have produced an advice note for adapting historic buildings for energy and carbon efficiency, while preserving their significance. It has a planning focus, but its purpose is to support property owners and local planning authorities with consistent decision-making when determining applications for planning permission and/or listed building consent.

The advice is to prioritise interventions that are proportionate, effective and sustainable. For instance, addressing damp can be an effective step. Damp reduces the thermal performance of an asset as well as creating potential health risks. Low-impact interventions should be considered first – as well as incremental interventions, the lifespan of interventions and the carbon cost of particular interventions - when assessing priorities.

Minimising harm and reducing maladaptation is also a priority. As discussed elsewhere in this guidance, knowing how a building is constructed and performs is key to healthy, sustainable interventions. Works should be undertaken by 'suitably qualified professionals' and interventions should be assessed as balancing clear sustainable objectives and conserving the significance of the asset.

Some changes to improve energy efficiency or generate energy will constitute development and require planning permission. Works that would affect the special interest of a listed building (including internal works) will require listed building consent, irrespective of the need for planning permission.

The guidance has detailed sections on permissions and decision making as well as an outline of the common adaptations where permission may be needed, with considerations for each. You'll find advice on insulation, draught-proofing, heating systems (including boilers and air source heat pumps), replacing or adapting windows, and installing solar panels. This information dispels some of the myths around actions that can be permitted in a listed building or conservation area.

The Sustainable Traditional Buildings Alliance's Guidance Wheel also sets out the advantages and potential risks of common retrofit interventions.

Sustainable practice

Thinking more broadly about sustainable practice and culture in your team, there are a number of things you could consider.

Formal organisational commitments

Formal organisational commitments or policies are a way to centre climate issues in your work. Climate pledges, environmental policies, green buildings strategies, environmental action plans, climate emergency declarations, environmental management plans, carbon reduction plans, and energy policies are all examples that an organisation might consider.

Each has a slightly different purpose, so you'll need a clear sense of what you want it to achieve before jumping in. For instance, do you want the focus to be specifically on your asset or cover your whole organisation, is your priority practical steps to creating change, do you want to communicate your position to external partners or is it about ensuring there a clear direction for your team.

Organisational culture and behaviour change

We've discussed a number of practical interventions that support behaviour change, such as energy monitors and technology that enables localised control of lighting, heating and water.

Internal working or steering groups are another way to devolve control to and engage a wider group of people in the project. Steering groups can be a great way of ensuring there are bottom-up mechanisms to capture ideas, facilitating input from a range of stakeholders from different parts of the organisation, as well as providing opportunities for more people to contribute to the thinking and delivering of your green objectives. It will provide you with a team of well-informed champions who can disperse key information and contribute to wider conversations on green issues at your organisation. It also prevents climate issues becoming top-down or tokenistic, by enabling more people to take ownership and drive the project forward.

You might also consider specialist training for the people who are leading on your climate work or consider taking a whole-team approach. Training such as Carbon Literacy Training and Climate Fresk provide learners with data about the causes and impacts of carbon emissions and the tools to have more meaningful conversations about them. UNCC:Learn offers free introductory e-courses covering climate science, policy, adaptation, mitigation and finance.

Programmes that support your team and/or the occupants of the building to cycle or walk to work can help people to reduce their carbon emissions and contribute to their health and wellbeing.

Other activities, such as growing, composting and recycling can provide further opportunities for people to take ownership of a piece of the puzzle and get started on their own climate journey. On-site composting facilities or a wormery, for instance, can transform your waste into useful materials to use in a community garden or share with local residents, as well as providing learning and education opportunities.

Practical management plans

Make sure you have detailed plans for who is responsible for delivering your climate objectives and have mechanisms in place to manage their delivery and monitor their impact.

Green conversations and leadership

One of the key barriers that organisations face, particularly VCSE organisations, is that they are already over-delivering on tight budgets and responding to increasing community need. This can leave little capacity to think about, much less take action on, climate issues. This sense that it is a priority, but slightly behind more immediate issues, is understandable considering the challenges that VCSE organisations work to address.

Understanding the co-benefits of climate action is an important starting point and can be helpful to bring people along on your climate journey. Many of the things you can do to reduce energy consumption and waste in community assets will also save organisations invaluable money. Whilst the more expensive big-ticket items have initial start-up costs, in the long-term many of them will still save you money, so it is always important to ask about payback periods (the period at which you will break even and cover your start-up costs) when receiving advice about interventions.

Interventions which reduce the carbon footprint of a building also provide a wealth of opportunities for learning and education for people in your organisation, the people who use the asset, as well as the wider community. Knowing about practical steps that people can take locally in their community to combat climate change, can be source of empowerment as well as providing opportunities for communities to come together to strengthen social bonds.

Locally delivered services, such as those delivered in community buildings, contribute to reduced travel distances and therefore to reducing pollution levels locally. Initiatives such as community gardens provide health and wellbeing opportunities through increased physical activity, supporting connection to and learning about the natural environment, improved knowledge about growing, access to and knowledge about using fresh healthy food, improved social connection, and reduced stress and improved mental health.

Community organisations are well placed to spread awareness and have conversations about climate issues and the steps we can all take to reduce emissions. Many organisations choose to invest in training their staff, so they think and talk about green issues more confidently (see organisational culture, above). But regardless of whether you make this commitment, any activity on green issues supports engagement with, and conversations about, climate issues.

Useful resources

Policy Resources

- climateemergency.uk/other-resources
- councilclimatescorecards.uk
- United Nations. (2025, 09 01). *The Climate Crisis - A Race We Can Win*. Retrieved from United Nations: un.org/en/un75/climate-crisis-race-we-can-win
- Climate Change Committee. (2020). *Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget*. London: Climate Change Committee. Retrieved from theccc.org.uk-Local-Authorities-and-the-Sixth-Carbon-Budget
- Climate Change Committee. (2023). *Progress in reducing emissions: 2023 Report to Parliament*. theccc.org.uk-Progress-in-reducing-UK-emissions-2023-Report-to-Parliament. Climate Change Committee
- Historic England. (2024). *Adapting Historic Buildings for Energy and Carbon Efficiency: Historic England Advice Note (HEAN 18)*. Swindon: Historic England. Retrieved from historicengland.org.uk-adapting-historic-buildings-energy-carbon-efficiency-advice
- Social Investment Business. (2024). *Energy efficiency of community buildings across England: A descriptive analysis*. Social Investment Business. Retrieved from sibgroup.org.uk-Energy-Efficiency-of-Community-Buildings
- Financial Times. (2025, June 2). *Nigel Farage pitches to Scottish voters with anti-net zero pledge*. Retrieved from Financial Times.

Energy and carbon audit resources

- It is worth checking out the 'surveys' section in our Managing your community building resource for general information on approaches and methods for gathering data about your asset, as well as the 'tips on getting a survey or audit' section to help make informed choices and get a survey that works for you.
- cse.org.uk/resource/energy-survey-for-community-buildings
- locality.org.uk-Quick-wins-Energy-efficiency-for-community-buildings
- natwest.com/business/green-banking/carbon-planner
- smeclimatehub.org/start-measuring

Approaches and interventions resources

- There is more information on building materials and construction in the 'Understanding your building' section in our Managing your community building resource.
- CSE has a detailed article exploring what is meant by green electricity tariffs and how to identify the 'greenest' options on the market.
- CSE - Making energy improvements in community buildings
- CSE - Energy monitors

Historic building resources

- historicengland.org.uk-adapting-historic-buildings-energy-carbon-efficiency-advice
- responsible-retrofit.org/greenwheel

Sustainable practice resources

- carbonliteracy.com
- climatefresk.org/world
- unccelearn.org
- locality.org.uk - The green asset guide
- Impact is a digital visualisation tool that helps you understand your community's carbon footprint. It works for parishes, wards and local authority areas. impact-tool.org.uk
- Local Intelligence Hub provides data about local MPs, constituencies, public opinion and the climate and nature movement. localintelligencehub.com
- Carbon & Place is a free tool that allows communities, planners, and policymakers in the UK to understand their local carbon footprint. carbon.place.

Further Locality resources

At Locality we are moving towards net zero ourselves, influencing to achieve change, and supporting our members and others to take community-led action on climate. We've undertaken research and developed practical tools to help community organisations measure their impact and decide what type of climate projects are right for them.
We also provide paid specialist advice and support to help organisations take action on climate change.

- locality.org.uk/consultancy-services/climate-consultancy
- locality.org.uk – Community businesses and climate action

There are resources and webinars on the Assets Hub on My Community covering all aspects of acquiring, developing, refurbishing and managing community buildings.

These include resources:

- Capital Funding Directory
- Writing a business plan for a capital project
- Assessing the feasibility of a community asset project
- Revenue funding sources to support project development costs

Transforming Community Spaces webinars:

- Securing funding for your capital project

- Renovating and adapting your space to meet community needs
- Taking your project from testing viability to a detailed business plan
- Why community engagement is key to your success
- Managing a community building
- Succession planning: community shares & community assets
- How community assets can benefit from climate action and energy efficiency
- Renting your space for the benefit of your community

Locality believes in the power of community to transform lives. As the leading national experts on community assets, we help communities take ownership of land and buildings, manage finances and governance, and connect with others running similar spaces - find out more.

locality

the power of community

Locality is the national membership network for community organisations that bring local people together to meet local needs. Locality supports local community organisations to be strong and successful, helping them to build a fairer society. Locality provides specialist advice, peer-learning, resources, and campaigns to create better operating conditions for our members.

Unlock the power in your community with us

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