

Somerset Council's Mythbusting Energy Factsheet

Somerset Council

Friday 24 January 2025

Summary

Somerset Council is developing the Somerset Energy Plan to achieve net zero by 2030, focusing on renewable energy feasibility and land allocation for the Local Plan. This effort faces political criticism locally and nationally, risking progress on clean energy opportunities. To address this, and to reduce the impact on planning officers and members of the planning committee a new approach was needed. Somerset Councillors, supported by [UK100's Local Power in Action Programme](#), created an [Energy Factsheet](#) to tackle misinformation and build support for their plan so they can harness the area's economic and energy potential.

CLlr Dixie Darch, Somerset Lead for the project said: "Our transition to renewable energy is happening at pace and, as with any emerging technology, there is often a lack of clarity around the facts, environmental impact, risks, payback periods and so on. Sometimes this manifests as misinformation which is used to resist the transition. The Energy Factsheet aims to counter this by providing critical support and guidance for council members, particularly those sitting on Planning committees, in responding to questions from the public. It is intended as a live document, to be amended and extended as we learn more in this exciting period of change towards a greener energy system."

The problem

Somerset Council is committed to tackling climate change and is working towards a carbon neutral Somerset by 2030.

In order to achieve this target, rapid decarbonisation of Somerset's Energy system is required. According to research by Regen UK, Somerset's progress up to 2023 had been slow, with some of the following being key factors in this::

- Only 1.2% of homes have a heat pump installed
- 42% of Somerset's homes and 44% of non-domestic buildings are rated Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) A to C
- Less than 1% of road vehicles registered in Somerset are electric
- The equivalent of just 5% of local energy demand is supplied by local renewable energy

With the support of Regen UK, in 2023 Somerset Council developed an [Energy Investment Plan](#), which analysed the local resources available to achieve a Net Zero pathway for Somerset. It identified opportunities for investment in Somerset, their potential economic and local benefits, policy development for Somerset Council, and options for delivering action.

To build on this plan it was identified that further work was needed to understand and then break down the barriers that have to date impeded progress. In particular Somerset Council identified a need to build their preparedness for the energy transition by:

1. Enhancing institutional knowledge and capacity to respond to net-zero related planning objections - which the rest of this case study will focus on
2. Getting to grips with grid-connections
3. Identifying financing opportunities

Why a new approach is needed to tackle net-zero related planning objections

Over the past year energy issues have come to the centre of political debate in the UK. Councils are often on the front line in this, with Councillors who sit on planning committees particularly exposed. This was most certainly the case in Somerset where concerns, fears and doubts about renewable and net-zero technologies have been rife. With the number of objections to renewable energy developments across the county rising, a new approach was required to support the council, and more specifically the planning committee to counter this and push forward with its Energy Investment Plan.

Broadly speaking the council was receiving two types of concerns

1. Reasonable, local concerns - Possibly about grid capacity or loss of agricultural land
2. Less reasonable, non-local concerns - Often about the technologies themselves, and in many cases based stemming from mis and dis information.

Sifting through and then responding to all the concerns was taking a lot of council time, especially when dealing with the same or similar objections. Some of the concerns were intentionally worded to make it difficult to completely dismiss e.g. Electric vehicles are slightly heavier than some of their petrol counterparts. In most of these cases there are either solutions to overcome the concern, or the risk needs to be put in context with the (often much-greater) risks from existing, widely-accepted technologies.

A solution was therefore needed to build Councillor's knowledge of these technologies, and provide a repository of clear and well evidenced responses to regular concerns.

At present simple and clear responses are surprisingly difficult to come by. Anti-renewable websites and articles present them without any assessment of mitigation or relative risk; pro-renewable sites ignore the concerns completely or dismiss them without explanation; and full assessments and scientific papers on the topic are long, detailed and often hard to understand.

The solution

A solution was needed to support busy councillors to provide sufficiently evidenced responses to residents' concerns or planning objections in a timely manner.

As part of UK100 Local Power in Action Programme, Somerset Council was supported to build up its own internal understanding of the energy system, and create a ready made repository of clear and well evidenced responses to regular concerns.

The concept was simple: build a list of the most-common concerns and objections that are raised about the solutions proposed in the council's Energy Investment Plan, and then develop a balanced response that councillors can trust to be accurate. The result would be an energy factsheet. Somerset Council deemed that having this local input to the responses by Somerset councillors would be the only way to achieve others' trust in the responses. This consisted of the following steps:

1. Establish a working group of cross-party councillors.

The purpose of the work was established and shared with councillors on the planning committee, inviting them to get involved in this collaboration so they can not only further their own knowledge on renewable energy, but prepare to mitigate misinformation in the area relating to new energy applications and the wider energy plan.

2. Establish climate literacy

To ensure all working group members were able to actively participate in the workshop, some initial energy training was delivered by the UK100 pathfinder. This provided an introduction to the energy system and various renewable technologies.

3. Identify concerns

Through a workshop with the full working group, an initial list of 150 concerns was raised and recorded. After merging, combining, reclassifying and rewording several of the points, a list of c.100 concerns was agreed upon.

4. Research concerns

The concerns were split out among the councillors and officers from the working group, with support from UK100. Each took responsibility for researching a selection of concerns, based on their knowledge, experience and interest.

To ensure continuity and an appropriate level of response for any enquiry a standard template was applied to all responses. The format for the responses is three part; Very brief response (one or two sentence); Detailed response (1 or more paragraphs); References

5. Review concerns

To conclude the process the full working group reconvened multiple times to review and agree the responses. And, after the completion of the first draft, senior Somerset officers and lead members reviewed and edited the wording of both concerns and responses as required.

Timeline

From agreeing the concept of the factsheet to having a full set of reviewed responses took nearly six months.

A rough breakdown of the timeline is:

- Developing and agreeing the project proposal and terms of reference: 1 month
- Identifying planning committee volunteers for the working group: 1 month
- Generating, rationalising and reviewing the list of 'concerns' over 2 working group meetings: 1 month
- Researching, drafting, and initially reviewing responses: 2 months
- Final document review by senior officers and members, with 1 final working group meeting: 1 month.

While it may seem like quite a long timeline to deliver such a factsheet, it was necessary to have a longer timeline to ensure all the working group members had sufficient time throughout the process, to think, digest, review and reflect the concerns or opinions of Somerset councillors and residents. Without allowing for this the resulting output would be far less likely to be relied upon by other Somerset members.

Stakeholders

The key stakeholders involved in the project were the councillors which made up the factsheet development working group.

Due to the fact that planning committee members typically have the most experience of fielding questions on renewable and sustainable technologies, and need for the resulting factsheet to help them with future responses, they were prioritised for participation in the working group. Efforts were also made to ensure that there was representation from all geographic areas and types (urban and rural), and also to ensure balanced political representation. A group of eight councillors was selected to form the factsheet working group. The cabinet member with responsibility for the planning committee played a key role in persuading the select councillors to partake.

The most significant challenge was trying to ensure that the working group was as broadly representative of the views of the full council in regards to renewables. This was imperative to ensure the challenge is always there

when discussing each issue. In instances during the workshops where the expected challenges did not come, the responsibility fell on the workshop facilitator to raise them for discussion. Council officers played an important role in helping to identify different challenges the council has received in advance of the workshop sessions.

Impact

Through partaking in the factsheet working group all 8 participants received an introductory presentation into the different renewable and sustainable technologies and a very high level explanation of how they worked. Through doing so these participants were able to build up their general climate literacy, enabling them to actively contribute to working group sessions.

Through partaking in discussions participants were able to build their understanding of the key arguments about each technology, and consider how best to respond to different concerns to minimise future back and forth. Where working group members had pre-existing knowledge they were encouraged to share it with others to build greater understanding.

While it is early days the resulting factsheet provides planning committee members with an important resource to refer to when concerns are raised. Somerset Council aims to roll out this resource more broadly within the council to build awareness among wider groups of councillors and officers. They also have aspirations to use it to inform their local climate engagement activities.

Lessons Learned

Involving councillors in the development of the factsheet was the critical differentiator for this project. While it may have been easier for a consultant to pull together the resource directly, working group participants would have missed out on several rich and useful conversations, and may not have taken ownership of the document to ensure its longevity in the future.

However, some key lessons for those looking to replicate this would be:

- Ensure strong facilitation to keep meetings to time. Members can be very passionate about topics resulting in excellent discussion, but strong facilitation is needed to keep meetings on track, clarify next steps and maximise time.
- Send information in advance of the workshops. This helps to ensure that all working group members are prepared for the meetings in advance.
- Consider the wider dissemination plan from the outset. The factsheet that has been developed provides a really useful resource to drive forward the Somerset Energy Investment Plan, and it can do this in various ways beyond supporting the planning committee. Take time to plan out who you would like it to be shared with and the means of sharing it.

For other councils interested in replicating the process Somerset has been on, the key thing is to remember the importance of the process, however long and difficult it may be. The process is what gives the resulting fact sheet its value.

To help you on your way though, Somerset Council and UK100 have created [this general version of the factsheet](#), which would provide a good starting point for discussions in your council.

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The cost of putting together the factsheet was nominal, with the main cost being the time associated with the Councillors and Officers attending the workshop sessions and undertaking independent research.

However, Somerset Council was also supported by UK100 through their Local Power in Action programme. As part of this programme, they were able to benefit from having a UK100 net zero pathfinder consultant, free of charge, to support them delivering a range of initiatives such as facilitating the development of the Energy Factsheet. While the support of an external consultant helped, it would be possible for a senior officer or Cabinet Member to play this role of project coordinator and facilitator.

Next steps

The fact sheet will be used by Somerset councillors, who will continuously monitor its usefulness. It has been suggested that the document will be reviewed on a bi-annual basis, with ad-hoc updates in between as and when necessary. This will present an opportunity to add in responses to future concerns that arise, and update previous responses as new information comes to light. Councillors will be able to access a feedback link to notify the team of any 'concerns' that are not included in the document and/or highlight any responses that appear to be inaccurate or controversial. It is important that the document is maintained, not least as Government policy is changing fast in this area since the 2024 General Election.

Links, contacts, and credits

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