

# Councillor briefing pack: Sustainable housing

Reducing energy and water bills, flood risk, extreme cold and overheating in new and existing housing stock



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## Key facts

- A quarter of the UK's carbon emissions come from energy used in the **home**.<sup>i</sup>
- Households in England and Wales spend almost **£30 billion** a year on gas and electricity.<sup>ii</sup>
- England's 2007 floods alone cost around **£4 billion**, of which only £3 billion was insurable.<sup>iii</sup>
- Around 10% of English households and 30% of Welsh households are in **fuel poverty**.<sup>iv</sup>
- By 2080, some parts of the UK are forecast to have **half the summer rainfall** they currently have, making drought a regular occurrence.<sup>v</sup>
- **'Green infrastructure'** (trees, parks and green spaces) can increase life expectancy and reduce health inequality.<sup>vi</sup>

## Why it matters

Councils' housing and planning responsibilities provide major opportunities to improve the sustainability of both existing and new homes. For councils with their own housing stock, new financing flexibilities provide more options to invest in their stock.

There are also centrally set requirements to meet. Under the Home Energy Conservation Act, councils with housing responsibilities are required to report every two years on the action they are taking to improve the energy efficiency of homes. These councils also have an enforcement role whenever a household is found to be at risk of excess cold or overheating.

## What difference can taking action make?

Saving money for local people. Energy bills are rising and millions of homes are due to have water meters fitted in the next few years, meaning that households will be able to save money by using energy and water more efficiently. Costs from flooding are also increasing; flood risk can be reduced through measures to improve the resilience of homes and through locating residential properties away from areas at high risk of flooding.

Helping the most vulnerable. The most vulnerable in society are the hardest hit by utility price rises, with millions of homes unable to adequately heat or cool their homes. Many households are also at risk of flooding or overheating. Councils can work to identify where the most vulnerable households are and focus their resources on these areas to reduce their risk, whilst encouraging partners to do the same.

Reducing carbon. Increasing the efficiency of homes, and encouraging the use of low carbon technologies such as solar panels and heat pumps, will reduce carbon emissions and make households less susceptible to the impacts of further energy price rises.

Improving quality of life. Increasing the number of green and blue spaces (such as parks, trees, green roofs and ponds) within a community provides a multitude of benefits; as well as reducing flood risk, they can also reduce overheating and improve air quality. They have also been shown to have a positive impact on life expectancy and wellbeing.

## What role can you play as an elected member?

- **Leadership:** Councils have an important leadership role in creating low carbon and climate-resilient communities. Councillors can lead by example (both through the council's operations and in their own homes) for example by installing low carbon or flood proofing measures and through local planning policies. They can also offer vision and direction to local groups and encourage residents to act.
- **Partnership:** This may include brokering agreements between different interests and partners, working across sectors to facilitate and encourage coordinated action. For example, developing planning policies to encourage sustainable housing requires the involvement and agreement of a diverse range of stakeholders and partnership working with developers. Councillors can bring together people and organisations with the right range of skills to deliver energy efficiency improvements in homes.
- **Communicating:** Councillors can play a key role in explaining why improving the sustainability of housing is important, what the options and opportunities are and how people, businesses and the council can make the best use of national programmes such as Green Deal or ECO. This may include working with local media to publicise stories related to the importance of sustainable housing. It could also involve helping to mobilise community groups, for example during severe weather episodes when people may be unable to leave their home.

- **Signposting:** Councillors can ensure they know what support can be drawn on from the council and other agencies, including community groups, so that they can effectively signpost people and organisations to these sources of support. For example, is there an energy efficiency retrofit programme that fuel poor households can apply to take part in? Could those whose home or business is at risk of flooding be signposted to the Environment Agency's resources and programmes?
- **Supporting delivery:** Councillors can help to make sure their authority has plans in place to support communities and resources to deliver them. Communities can be empowered by providing them with support, funding and information.
- **Scrutiny:** Councillors can play a key role in enabling strong and timely delivery by asking the right questions of officers and partners.

## How it's done

There are many opportunities for councils to promote sustainable housing. Not all of the areas below will be relevant to every council; these are intended as suggestions and ideas for consideration. Members should begin by establishing what their climate change priorities are locally; for example, do they relate to flood risk, water resources, or improving the efficiency of housing? This will help to determine which of the following actions are most appropriate for your council.

### **Council estate - for example:**

- Where the council owns its own housing, review the Housing Revenue Account business plan and asset management strategy to consider how to invest, as efficiently as possible, in existing homes to maximise the energy efficiency, water efficiency and overall resilience of the stock.

**In council led plans - for example:**

- Look at options subject to viability testing, to strengthen the low carbon/ climate resilience requirements of new developments in the local plan, for example through the inclusion of high standards of energy and water efficiency and/or Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (see York case study, below).
- Encourage high levels of sustainability and resilience in existing homes by issuing guidance on retrofitting energy efficiency and, if relevant, specific advice on what can be done in a conservation area (see Camden case study, below).
- Investigate opportunities to link climate change priorities into programme or initiatives that are already underway, such as fuel poverty or winter warmth schemes, Decent Homes programmes or general neighbourhood improvement programmes.

**In partnership - for example:**

- The Energy Company Obligation (ECO) programme funds energy efficiency improvements worth around £1.3 billion every year. Work with partners such as housing providers and local installers to lever in funds such as this to take vulnerable households out of fuel poverty, for example through commissioning or supporting area based energy efficiency programmes (see Kent case study, below).
- Work with the Local Enterprise Partnership and Local Nature Partnership to support the delivery of blue/green infrastructure (such as parks, gardens, trees, woodland, green roofs/walls, rivers and ponds) for new and existing developments.
- Promote public messaging to raise awareness on overheating with information on how people can cope during heat waves and changes they can make to their home, work place or community area so they are less at risk.

York's emerging Local Plan includes a number of policies that are designed to ensure new development is adapted to climate change. This includes directing development away from flood-risk areas, promoting green infrastructure, requiring the use of sustainable drainage systems and setting targets concerning run-off. Further information is available [here](#). (Chapter 5)

Kent's Warm Homes Scheme has provided more than 1,000 eligible households across Kent and Medway with funded energy saving improvements such as cavity wall insulation, loft insulation and heating. The scheme is a partnership between Kent County Council, Medway Council, the District Councils, representatives from local housing providers and the NHS and is delivered through funding from ECO. The project works alongside the Winter Warmth Programme which is designed to support the most vulnerable elderly residents who are at the greatest risk of suffering ill health during cold weather. Further information is available [here](#).

The London Borough of Camden has produced energy efficiency 'retrofitting planning guidance' that clearly sets out the planning and building control procedures that people will need to follow in relation to a range of energy efficiency and renewable energy technologies. Since 75% of the council's stock is within conservation areas, the council has also produced guidance on how to improve energy efficiency in homes without harming the character and appearance of the conservation area. Further information is available [here](#).

## Further information

The National Adaptation Programme – sets out what government, businesses, the third sector and society are doing to become more climate ready (UK Government)

Housing Revenue Account Self financing – introductory guide for councillors (LGA)

Climate Local energy efficiency case studies: a set of case studies looking at actions by different councils to improve the efficiency of housing in their areas (LGA)

Councillor briefing: covering planning, climate change and sustainable energy. This briefing is designed to help elected members understand the role of planning in adapting to and mitigating against the effects of climate change (Planning Advisory Service)

Ready for flooding and Reducing flood risk – non technical advice on cutting flood risk (National Flood Forum).

Improving the energy efficiency of your home non-technical advice on retrofitting energy efficiency measures in homes (Energy Saving Trust)

Renewable energy and local plans case study (Planning Advisory Service)

## Endnotes

- i. DECC, 2009, Domestic Energy Factfile 2009
- ii. Average spend of £1,264 per household - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-24238708>
- iii. Defra, 2008, Future Water, The Government's water strategy for England
- iv. DECC, 2014 Annual fuel poverty statistics report
- v. See footnote iii



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