SWNZH LAEP – Project Summary Report

Summary report for the delivery of stages 1-3 of Local Area Energy Planning for Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire & Wiltshire, commissioned by the South-West Net Zero Hub.

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1. Executive summary

The Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) and Regen were commissioned by the South West Net Zero Hub (SWNZH) to support local authorities in Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, and Wiltshire to deliver Stages 1–3 of Local Area Energy Planning (LAEP). The project was designed in response to local authority demand in the region for a more proportionate, affordable, and delivery-focused approach to energy planning that builds confidence, capability, and shared understanding ahead of more complex technical modelling.

Rather than producing a full technical LAEP, the project focused on establishing strong foundations for future delivery. This included developing a consistent technical and non-technical evidence base, strengthening governance and stakeholder engagement, and supporting local authorities to articulate clear priorities and next steps through delivery-focused Forward Plans. The project adopted a sub-regional model, enabling shared learning, alignment, and economies of scale across participating authorities while retaining flexibility to reflect local context.

Delivery was structured around the Design Council's Double Diamond[1] and aligned with the Energy Systems Catapult's LAEP methodology[2]. A hub-and-spoke governance model, centred on a multi-authority Core Team, enabled collaboration and collective decision-making, supported by place-based delivery leads and thematic expertise. Over twenty engagement activities were delivered, involving more than two hundred stakeholders across the four areas.

Key outputs included Local Area Characterisations (LACs), Baseline Energy Representations (BERs), data repositories, Forward Plans, and a suite of practical tools to support engagement and decision-making. Together, these outputs provide a coherent, evidence-based foundation for progressing LAEP and net zero delivery in each area. Importantly, the project demonstrated the value of treating early-stage LAEP as a learning journey rather than a standalone technical product.

Learning from the project highlights that focusing on Stages 1–3 of LAEP can deliver immediate value for local authorities, particularly in contexts of limited capacity and funding. The approach taken through this commission is replicable, scalable, and well suited to regional coordination through Net Zero Hubs, placing local authorities in a stronger position to commission and deliver subsequent stages of LAEP in a way that is affordable, aligned, and focused on delivery.

[1] Design Council (2019) *The Double Diamond: A Framework for Innovation*. London: Design Council.
[2] Energy Systems Catapult (2023) *Local Area Energy Planning: Methodology and Guidance*. Birmingham: ESC.

Summary of key project learnings

Table 1 - Summary of key project learnings

Key Learning	What the project demonstrated
Non-technical insight is essential to effective early-stage LAEP	Technical baselining alone is insufficient. Integrating governance, organisational capacity, political context, delivery capability and stakeholder dynamics alongside technical evidence was critical to producing realistic, locally owned and delivery-focused Forward Plans.
Tools add most value as facilitation mechanisms, not standalone outputs	The WATI, Visioning and Capability Assessment tools were most effective when used to structure discussion, test assumptions and support shared understanding, rather than as standalone outputs. Their use enabled clearer conversations about ambition, risk, roles and sequencing.
Clear framing of purpose and scope improves engagement quality	Engagement was most productive where participants clearly understood the purpose of activities, how outputs would be used and how early-stage LAEP (Stages 1–3) differed from later technical modelling. This improved focus, managed expectations and generated more actionable feedback.
Sustaining engagement momentum requires alignment with local authority capacity	Maintaining momentum across a multi-month project was challenging where local authority teams faced capacity constraints. This reinforced the importance of proportional engagement approaches and recognising that effective engagement itself requires time and resourcing.
Early focus on governance, capability and sequencing strengthens delivery outcomes	The strongest Forward Plans were those where governance arrangements, delivery capacity and sequencing were considered early and treated as core elements of LAEP, rather than downstream issues, improving readiness for later stages and delivery.

Summary of project recommendations

Table 2 - Summary of project recommendations

Recommendation	Implication for future action
The SWNZH should continue to act as a convenor and delivery partner,	**Upskilling councils and strengthening capability:** Develop coordinated skills and capability support, including shared training, officer upskilling programmes, and cross-authority roles, building on existing governance models and tailored to identified gaps.

supporting collective action through targeted programmes, shared services, and follow-on projects that respond to common needs identified through this project.	**Increasing renewable energy deployment:** Support Local Plan policy development, strengthen renewable energy evidence bases to a common standard, and enable pipeline-building through strategic energy strategies and engagement tools such as Future Energy Landscapes.[3]
	Retrofit and buildings decarbonisation: Provide targeted support to help local authorities interpret policy changes and share best practice on retrofit in sensitive contexts, including facilitated engagement with specialist bodies such as Historic England and Natural England.
	RESP and network engagement: Facilitate regular regional or sub-regional engagement forums, support stakeholder mapping, and help translate local intelligence into DFES and RESP inputs.
	Data use and management: Support shared data management approaches, develop practical case studies on data use, and explore options for Hub-led, in-house, or third-party data stewardship.
Prioritise delivery of LAEP Stages 1–3 as a standalone phase	Stages 1–3 provide a lower-cost, more resilient and achievable foundation for LAEP, particularly in a changing national energy landscape. National and regional actors should support access to resources that enable all local authorities to undertake this foundational work.
Seek opportunities for sub-regional approaches	Future LAEP support should prioritise sub-regional delivery models where local authorities face shared challenges and operate within common energy and infrastructure systems. Regional bodies such as Net Zero Hubs are well placed to coordinate this activity, enabling shared learning, consistency of approach and economies of scale, while supporting alignment with network operators and regional planning processes. Evidence from this project, and from comparable approaches such as the Greater London Authority's Regional Energy Accelerator, demonstrates that sub-regional models can accelerate progress and strengthen local delivery capacity.[4]
Adopt a "do with, not for" approach to LAEP	The value of early-stage LAEP lies as much in the process as the outputs. Supporting local authorities to lead Stages 1–3 themselves, with light-touch external facilitation and access to tools and data, builds confidence, capability and long-term delivery resilience.

[3] Centre for Sustainable Energy (2023) *Future Energy Landscapes*. Available at: https://www.cse.org.uk/my-community/future-energy-landscapes/ (Accessed: 14 January 2026).

[4] Greater London Authority (2022) *London Regional Energy Accelerator*. London: GLA. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/environment-and-climate-change/energy/london-regional-energy-accelerator

2. Background and rationale

The South-West Net Zero Hub (SWNZH), funded by Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) and situated within the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority (WEMCA), was established in 2018 to support local authorities across the south-west region to develop and progress credible, investable net zero projects and pipelines[5].

There are 19 local authorities and the WEMCA in the region (see Figure 1), and since 2018 SWNZH has delivered a range of initiatives and programmes aiming to remove barriers to decarbonisation across the region and build local authority capacity and capabilities to progress their respective net zero ambitions.

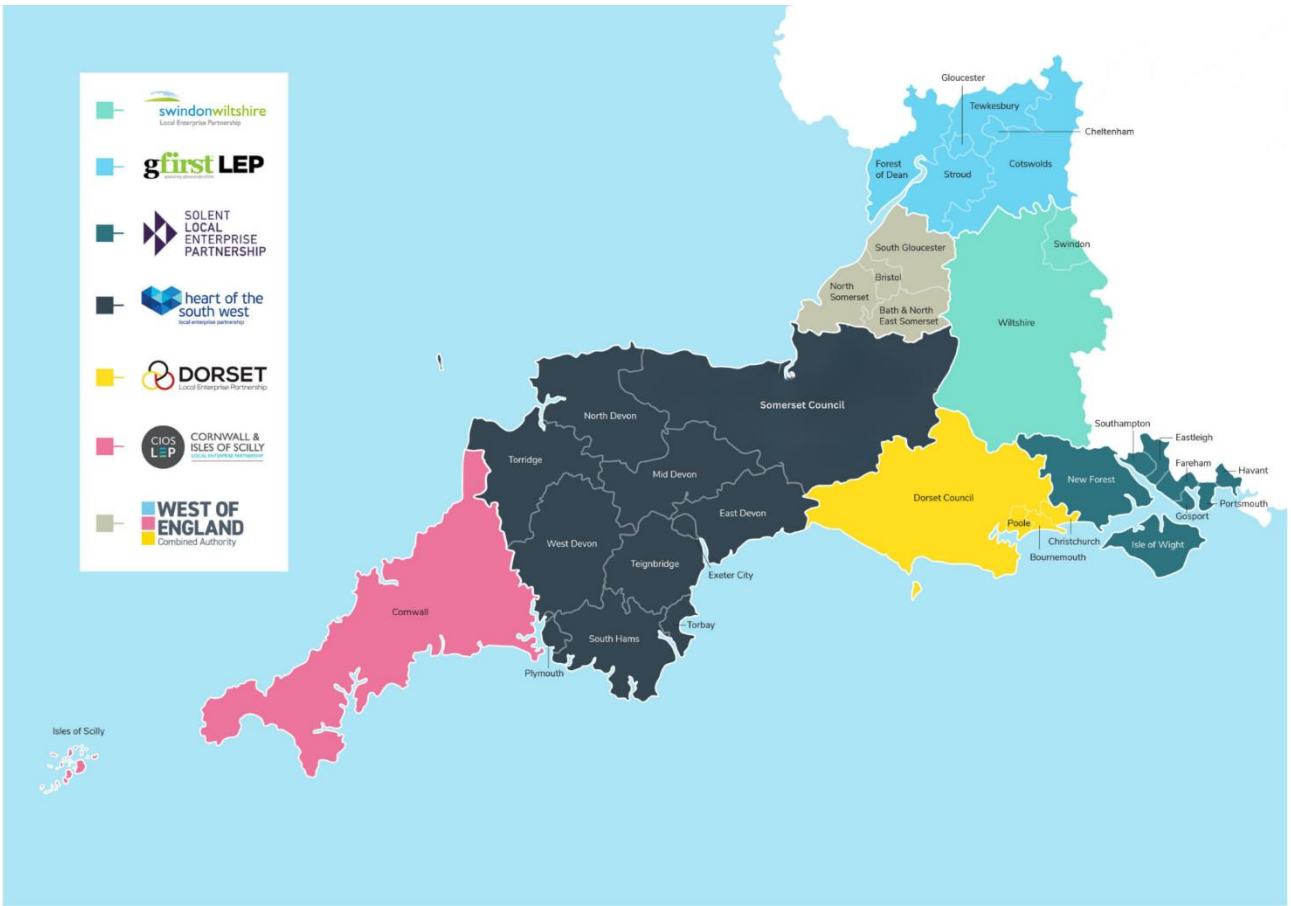

Figure 1 - The SWNZH area (SWNZH, 2024)

[5] Southwest Net Zero Hub (2024) *What is the Net Zero Hub?* Available at: https://www.swnetzerohub.org.uk/about-us/what-is-the-net-zero-hub/ (Accessed: *14 January 2026*)

During 2023, several local authorities in the Southwest approached the SWNZH seeking support on LAEP, citing challenges around cost, complexity, and the ability of plans to translate into delivery. In response, the Hub designed this commission to provide targeted early-stage support that lays the foundations for effective LAEP and net zero delivery in each area going forwards.

Local Area Energy Planning (LAEP)

Local Authorities, as the lowest tier of UK government and holders of a range of statutory powers are widely recognised as central to the delivery of net zero. However, their ability to directly deliver against these ambitions is often constrained by limited internal capacity and capability, challenges in accessing sufficient funding and finance, and the wider national policy environment.

LAEP offers a structured, evidence-based approach for identifying what is required to decarbonise local energy systems. It provides a practical tool that local authorities can use to set priorities, coordinate stakeholders, and galvanise action within their areas.

For many local authorities, securing the funding needed to undertake a Local Area Energy Plan remains a significant challenge, while climate and energy teams nationally are under increasing pressure to demonstrate progress towards net zero. Since the declaration of climate emergencies across the country from 2018 onwards, substantial effort has been directed towards developing plans, and there is now a strong social and political expectation to see tangible action. As a result, officers are keen to prioritise activity that delivers demonstrable progress and clear value for money in the near term.

The stage 1-3 approach

The Energy Systems Catapult (ESC) LAEP methodology, widely regarded as the primary approach to LAEP, sets out seven key stages in the development of a plan (ESC 2023). As illustrated in Figure 2, these stages span preparation and mobilisation, stakeholder engagement, system modelling and scenario development, and action and delivery planning.

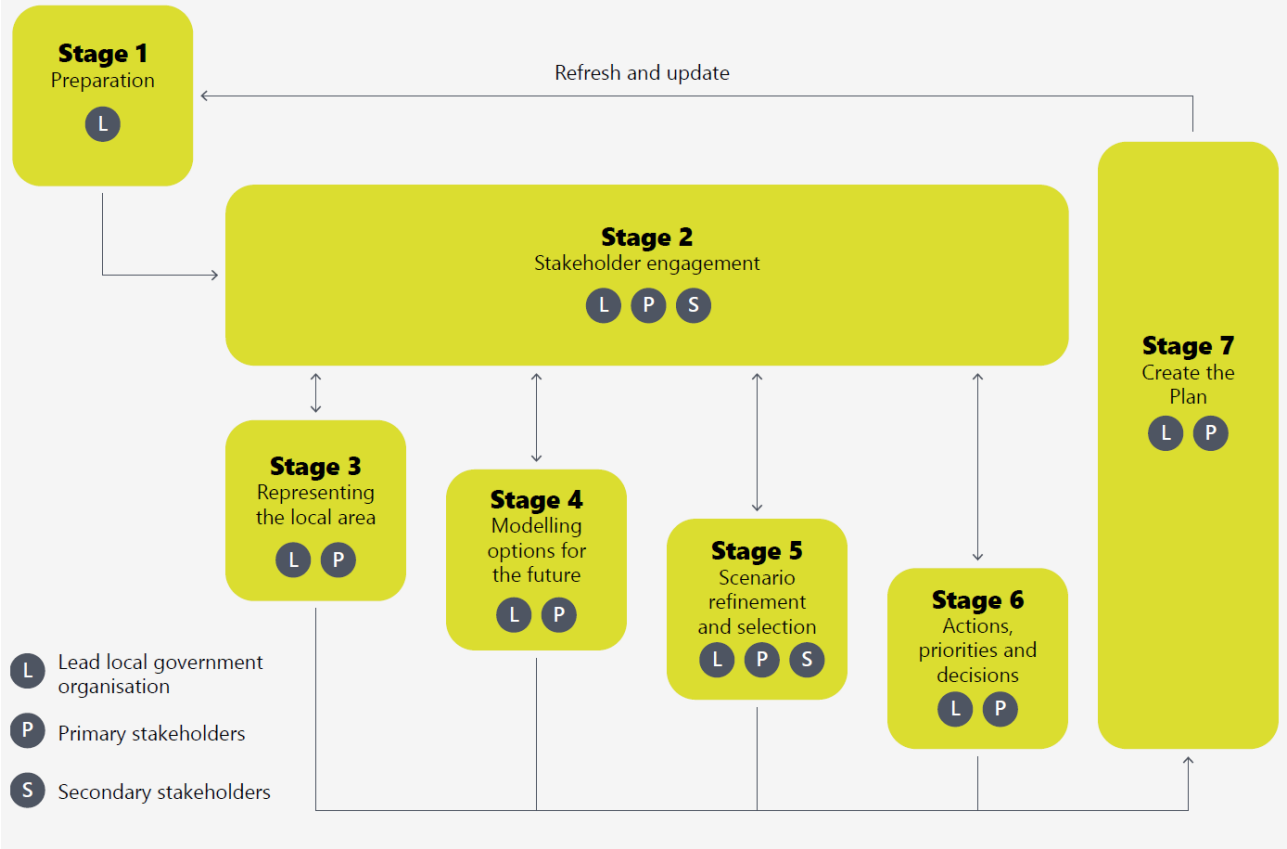

Figure 2 - Seven stages of LAEP (ESC, 2023).

With local authorities across the South West citing cost, complexity, and deliverability as key barriers to progressing full LAEPs, alongside an evolving regional and national energy planning landscape and an impending local government review, the SWNZH adopted a regional approach to support local authorities by focusing resources on the earlier stages of LAEP. This approach was intended to build capability, consistency, and confidence across the region, while responding pragmatically to differing levels of readiness and capacity.

Experience locally and nationally has shown that technically robust LAEPs do not automatically translate into delivery[6]. It was therefore recognised that undertaking detailed modelling too early, particularly in a context of variable data availability, internal capacity, stakeholder alignment, and governance maturity risked embedding weak assumptions, increasing costs, and producing outputs that local authorities would struggle to own, maintain, or act upon.

Stages 1–3 of the LAEP methodology prioritise governance, stakeholder engagement, senior and political buy-in, early consideration of delivery and finance, and the development of a consistent technical and non-technical evidence base. In the Southwest, this aligns closely with what local authorities have identified as most needed to progress LAEP effectively at this stage: building confidence, capability, alignment, and a shared understanding of both opportunities and

[6] Centre for Sustainable Energy (2022) *From plans to delivery: lessons from local energy planning*. Bristol: CSE.

constraints. It was felt that focusing on these early-stage activities would prioritise collaboration and consistency across the region, whilst placing local authorities in a stronger position to commission subsequent LAEP stages, with the skills and confidence to specify scope, challenge assumptions, manage costs, and ensure future technical work is proportionate, reusable, and delivery-focused.

3. Project scope

This project was delivered over a ten-month period, running from January to November 2025, with success defined not by the production of a full technical Local Area Energy Plan, but by the extent to which local authorities were equipped with the confidence, capability, evidence, and governance needed to progress to subsequent LAEP stages in a coordinated, cost-effective, and delivery-focused way.

With the primary audience for the outputs of this project being the local authority officers and elected members responsible for climate, energy, planning, transport, and infrastructure decision-making across the respective areas, outputs were designed to be owned, tailored and maintained by local authorities and used to support internal decision-making, engagement with key stakeholders and the future commissioning of subsequent LAEP stages where appropriate.

To reflect this ambition, the project was structured around a set of core objectives designed to build capability, consistency, and readiness across the respective areas and region. These were:

- To establish strong foundations for LAEP across the four local authority areas, embedding delivery and investment planning from the start to reduce the gap between planning and implementation.
- To develop a credible and consistent baseline understanding of energy systems in each area and across the region, including energy demand, supply and infrastructure.
- To engage key stakeholders in each respective area and establish local governance structures to build longer-term buy-in, reduce obstacles and accelerate delivery.
- To encourage collaboration, alignment, and shared learning across the region through co-exploration, knowledge sharing, shared templates, and the identification of best practice, while supporting engagement with key partners such as Distribution System Operators (DSO) and emerging Regional Energy Strategic Planning (RESP) processes.
- To develop a replicable process that can be applied with and within local authorities both elsewhere in the region and more widely in other hub areas across the country.

With the project following stages 1-3 of the ESC Methodology, activities within scope of the project included the following core activities in Table 3.

Table 3 - activities within scope of the project

Focus area	Activities
Mobilisation, governance and preparation (ESC Stage 1)	• Assessing existing strategies, plans, studies, tools, and data platforms • Undertaking gap analysis of governance, capability, resources, and evidence • Supporting the development of a shared local energy vision in each area • Establishing or agreeing data platforms and repositories that can be owned and maintained by local authorities
Stakeholder identification and engagement (ESC Stage 2)	• Identifying and mapping key stakeholders required for LAEP development and delivery and designing a tailored stakeholder engagement plan for each area. • Delivering a minimum of twenty engagement activities across the four areas • Supporting local authorities to secure political and senior officer buy-in • Aligning engagement approaches with emerging RESP and network planning processes.
Understanding and representing the local energy system (ESC Stage 3)	• Developing a baseline representation of the local energy system for each area, covering energy demand, supply, networks and infrastructure and emissions baselines • Identifying data gaps and prioritising requirements for future stages • Ensuring outputs are transparent, interoperable, and aligned with DSO tools (e.g. LENZA), with methodologies, assumptions, and limitations document to enable future use. • Identifying opportunities for alignment with local planning, transport, and infrastructure priorities
Readiness for future LAEP stages	• Setting priorities and parameters for future technical modelling (Stages 4–7) • Developing forward plans, including indicative timelines, resourcing, and cost implications • Enabling knowledge transfer and capability building for local authority officers • Facilitating collaboration and shared learning across participating areas • Developing replicable templates, tools, and processes for wider use across the region

With the project intentionally designed to focus on the early stages of LAEP to ensure local authorities were well positioned to progress confidently and cost-effectively to later LAEP stages, out-of-scope activities therefore included detailed scenario development, spatial–temporal

optimisation modelling, and pathway selection (ESC Stages 4–7), as well as the production of a full technical LAEP, project-level business cases or implementation and delivery of projects.

The four local authority areas

With LAEPs or similar studies in process or completed for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Somerset, Southampton and the West of England, this project focussed on providing support to the remaining local authorities in the region, with the exception of Swindon. A brief summary of each participating area, including relevant context on their decarbonisation activity to date, is set out below.

Devon, Plymouth and Torbay

Devon operates within a two-tier local government structure, comprising Devon County Council, eight district, borough and city councils, and two unitary authorities: Plymouth City Council and Torbay Council. The Devon Carbon Plan provides a collaborative, county-wide framework involving the County Council, districts, and unitary authorities, and identifies the need for coordinated planning to support Devon's transition to a low-carbon energy system.

To support this, the Devon Energy Planning Group was established in June 2023 and brings together officers from twenty-two strategic organisations, including local authorities, network operators, and other key partners, to oversee the preparation of a Devon-wide LAEP. Prior to this project, the group had delivered a number of foundational activities, including focused sessions to identify and document data requirements, early exploration of energy system modelling tools for later LAEP stages (Stages 4–7), and initial work to explore a potential hydrogen pathway for northern Devon.

Plymouth City Council and Torbay Council, as unitary authorities within the Devon area, bring distinct characteristics and priorities that are important to reflect within a Devon-wide approach. Plymouth has an area-wide net zero target of 2030 and has progressed advanced work on heat network zoning and delivery, including the development of a city-scale heat network linked to the Devonport Energy from Waste facility. Torbay, with a net zero target of 2050, faces different challenges, including limited renewable energy potential and a high proportion of emissions from buildings and transport, reinforcing the need for a coordinated, spatial understanding of energy demand and infrastructure. Both authorities are active partners in the Devon Energy Planning Group and see the LAEP as a critical mechanism for aligning local priorities with a wider county-wide energy strategy.

Further detail on activities in Devon, Plymouth and Torbay can be found here.

Dorset

Dorset Council is a unitary authority and adopted its Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy in 2021, which was refreshed in 2023. The strategy commits the council to influencing strategic

energy planning, including through the development of a Local Area Energy Plan. In early 2024, Dorset Council also undertook a cross-party review of grid capacity, the recommendations of which included progressing a LAEP, providing a clear political mandate to proceed.

A key objective for Dorset's participation in this project was to ensure that early-stage LAEP work could help inform the development of Dorset's first single, county-wide Local Plan, with a draft due in March 2026. Dorset has also previously undertaken strategic energy and investment planning through a pan-Dorset Low Carbon Investment Plan, developed in 2021 with Regen through the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership, which drew on Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole's LAEP. This project therefore sought to build on existing work while establishing a Dorset-specific evidence base and governance structure.

Further detail can be found here.

Gloucestershire

Gloucestershire is a two-tier authority comprising Gloucestershire County Council and six district councils, with local net zero target dates ranging from 2030 to 2045. Prior to this project, a number of districts had undertaken elements of energy planning, including renewable energy assessments in five of the six districts. However, there had been no single, coordinated approach to energy planning at a county-wide scale.

The primary aim for Gloucestershire through this project was to develop a more cohesive and strategic approach to LAEP, bringing together existing activity and governance structures and strengthening the case for progressing to later LAEP stages (Stages 4–7). While no formal energy planning group had been established at the outset, existing governance arrangements, including Climate Leadership Gloucestershire and the county-wide Climate Officers' group, provided a strong foundation on which to build.

Further detail can be found here.

Wiltshire

Wiltshire Council is a unitary authority with a commitment to becoming a carbon neutral organisation by 2030. Its Climate Strategy, adopted in 2022, includes objectives to increase renewable energy generation through partnership working and to investigate and progress joined-up LAEP as a mechanism for delivering wider net zero ambitions.

Prior to the start of this project, Wiltshire Council had already established an internal LAEP working group, which had been meeting regularly since January 2024. Wiltshire's focus for this commission was therefore on remobilising and strengthening existing project teams and governance routes, enhancing stakeholder engagement, and making more effective use of data and tools to develop a robust understanding of the local energy system and inform future stages of LAEP.

Further detail can be found here.

4. The project approach

This section sets out the delivery approach used to implement the project scope, including the overall methodology, governance and delivery structure, and how engagement and technical activities were sequenced across the four project phases.

Building on the scope and objectives set out in Section 3, this project required a delivery approach that could support early-stage LAEP activity across multiple local authorities with differing levels of readiness, while enabling collaboration and shared learning at a regional level. To meet these requirements, the Design Council's Framework for Innovation (Design Council, 2019)[7] was adopted as the overarching delivery approach for the project.

The framework's four iterative phases, structured around the Double Diamond model (Figure 3), were used to secure stakeholder buy-in, build momentum, and support parallel progress across the four areas. This approach was considered the most pragmatic way to deliver the ambitions of the commission, reflecting the interdependent and non-linear nature of Stages 1–3 of the ESC LAEP methodology, while providing a clear and flexible structure through which work could be undertaken simultaneously across the areas and collectively at a regional level.

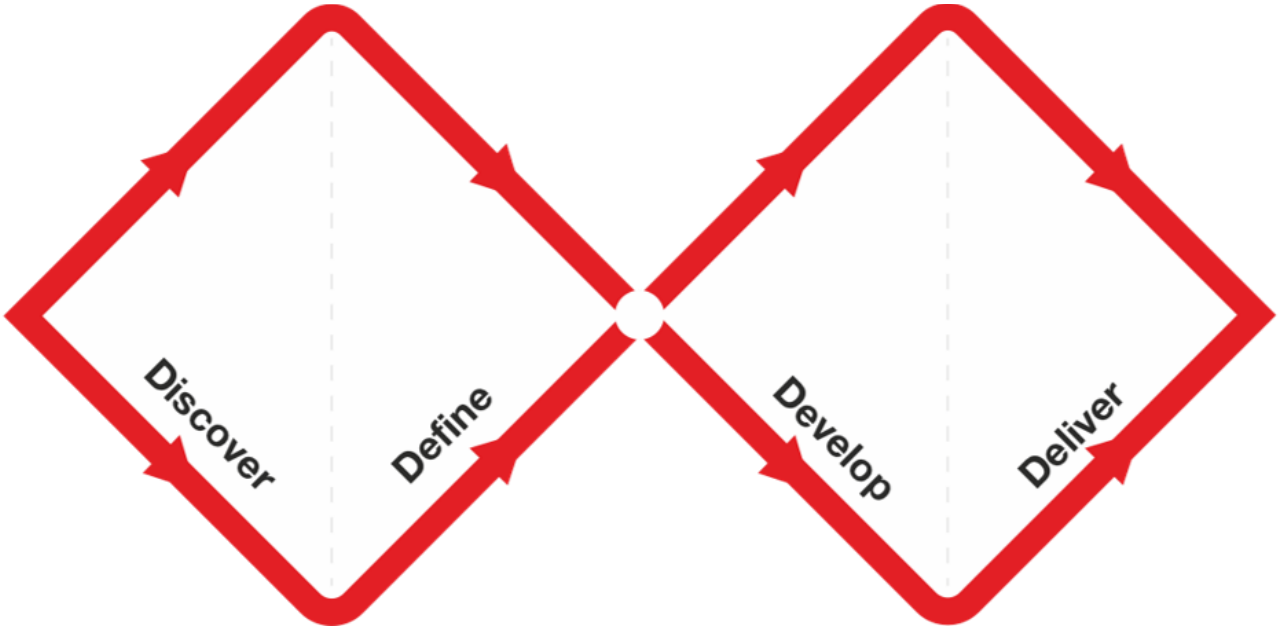

Figure 3 - The Design Council's Double Diamond (Design Council, 2019)

[7] Design Council (2019) *The Double Diamond: A Framework for Innovation*. London: Design Council.

Through a deliberative and structured process, the four local authorities were guided through the iterative phases of the double diamond methodology, adapted for this project to align more to the early stages of ESC LAEP methodology, with the intention of each phase as follows:

- **Discovery Phase** – establishing a clear, shared understanding of the starting point in each area by mapping existing activity, data availability, and local context.
- **Definition Phase** – working with local authorities and stakeholders in each area to refine priorities, agree focus areas, and shape the direction of future local energy planning activity.
- **Development Phase** – drawing together evidence and learning from earlier phases to develop robust, practical forward plans for each area.
- **Delivery Phase** – supporting the transition from planning to action by enabling local authorities to take forward agreed priorities beyond the life of this commission.

Across these phases, a consistent set of core activities was delivered to develop a baseline understanding of local energy systems and to support readiness for subsequent LAEP stages. These activities included:

- **Data identification, collation, and processing**, taking account of national datasets and wider considerations such as Distribution Network Operator (DNO) requirements and emerging RESP processes, to ensure data were fit for purpose.
- **Assessment of the wider delivery environment** through Local Area Characterisation, using the *Walking Around the Issues framework (CSE, 2021)* to capture non-technical challenges alongside technical considerations.
- **Development of accessible visualisations** to support communication of findings by local authority officers, both internally and with external stakeholders.
- **Gap analysis** to assess the adequacy of available data and identify priority actions to address gaps ahead of later LAEP stages.
- **Establishment of data repositories** to enable local authorities to access, maintain, and reuse data beyond the project, including for future LAEP Stages 4–7 or other strategic purposes.
- **Development of forward plans** setting out what actions are required, by whom, and in what sequence, to progress energy planning and delivery in each area.

Figure 4 provides a visual overview of how these activities were sequenced and mapped across the four project phases.

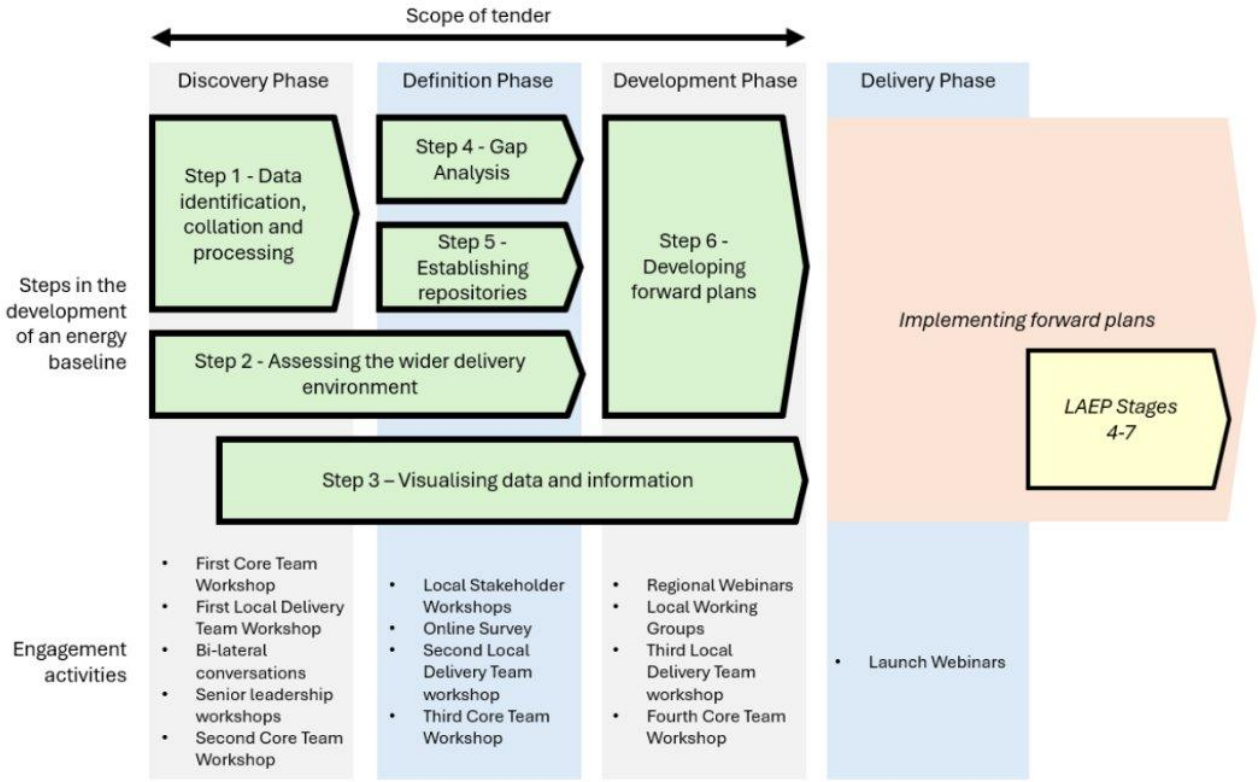

Figure 4 - Project Delivery Plan

Governance and delivery structure

To best facilitate regional collaboration, maximise effective use of project resource, and capitalise on the strengths of the delivery partnership, a hub and spoke delivery structure was used. This enabled consistent delivery across all areas whilst allowing flexibility to respond to local context and ensuring that the specialist expertise of CSE and Regen could be targeted to where it added the most value.

Within this structure, a 'Core Team' acted as a steering group at the centre, with placed-based support provided in each respective area to deliver project activities and expert thematic leads setting project direction and providing peripatetic support to each area as required, with further detail on these three elements below.

The Core team

The Core Team acted as the project steering group providing governance and oversight of the project. It comprised lead representatives from each participating local authority, the SWNZH, CSE, and Regen. Facilitated by CSE and Regen, the Core Team provided the primary forum for agreeing, testing, and refining the project approach, with four meetings held over the course of the project.

Following discussion at the first Core Team meeting, representatives from the DNOs, the DSOs and the Gas Distribution Network (GDN) were invited to participate in subsequent meetings. The National Energy System Operator (NESO) was also invited but was unable to attend.

Each project phase was formally initiated and concluded through a Core Team meeting, as outlined in Section 2.1.1. This structure enabled the Core Team to reflect on progress from the preceding phase, review emerging outputs such as the developing energy baseline, and shape priorities for the next phase, including how local authority feedback should be reflected in project deliverables. Bringing all participating local authorities together at these points also supported knowledge sharing and alignment across the four areas.

Figure 5 – the third Core Team meeting.

Place-based support.

To support delivery in each of the four areas, a local area lead was assigned from either CSE or Regen, drawing on prior experience and existing working relationships within each area to maximise efficiency. These local area leads worked closely with the designated lead local

authority officer and a SWNZH representative to coordinate and deliver project activities in their respective areas.

Thematic work areas

Utilising the expertise of the respective partner organisations, CSE and Regen were responsible for leading on different elements of the overall approach with CSE leading on the engagement and non-technical analysis elements and Regen leading on the technical data and energy baselining work. As leads, each respective organisation was responsible for deciding on the overall approach of each element, provide key tools or resources related to that area of work (i.e. RFIs, workshop plans etc), as well as providing peripatetic spot support to any area as required.

A visual representation of the governance and delivery structure is provided in Figure 6.

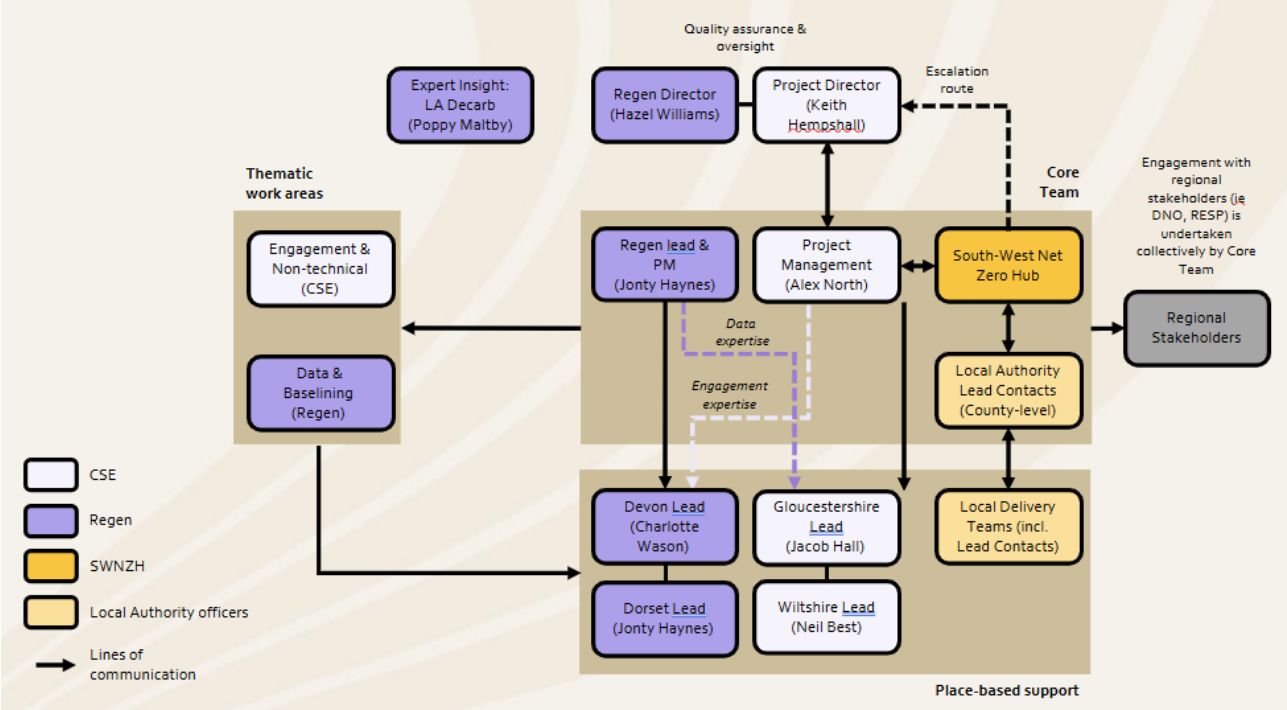

Figure 6 - Project Governance and Delivery Structure

Engagement activities

During the project, over twenty workshops were held, engaging more than two hundred stakeholders across the four areas. A plan for engagement activities to be undertaken through the project was presented at the first Core Team meeting to support a regionally consistent approach while allowing flexibility for local tailoring where appropriate.

This engagement activity was structured across the four project phases, with a summary of key activities undertaken in each phase outlined in Table 4.

Table 4 - Summary of key project engagement activities delivered.

Project Phase	Purpose	Key engagement activities delivered
Discovery Phase	Establish a clear, shared understanding of the starting point in each area by mapping existing activity, data availability, and local context.	• Formation of local delivery teams bringing together internal council officers and, where relevant, external public sector stakeholders (e.g. NHS, police). • Desk-based review of local strategies, plans, and delivery activity to support stakeholder mapping. • One-to-one conversations with 4–6 key stakeholders per area to secure buy-in and inform baselining activities. • Early internal engagement with senior officers and elected members to explore strategic ambitions and opportunities.
Definition Phase	Refine priorities and focus areas through wider stakeholder engagement and testing of emerging evidence.	• In-person stakeholder workshops (Gloucestershire and Wiltshire), with targeted engagement in Devon and Dorset. • Review and refinement of Local Area Characterisation and BERs through facilitated activity with local delivery teams. • Bespoke stakeholder surveys in Dorset (council delivery areas) and Wiltshire (local businesses).
Development Phase	Drawing together evidence and learning from earlier phases to co-design practical forward plans and strengthen understanding of key thematic issues.	• Facilitation of local delivery team workshops to review and refine draft priorities and actions. • Senior leadership engagement to review and sign off proposed priorities. • Delivery of four regional thematic webinars covering funding, modelling, LAEP approaches, and RESP to support local prioritisation activities • Development and testing of draft Forward Plans with local delivery teams in each area
Delivery Phase	Support transition from planning to action beyond the project lifecycle.	• Handover to local authorities to take forward agreed actions within their Forward Plans • No direct delivery activity undertaken within the scope of this commission

5. Outputs

The outputs of the project reflect the staged, iterative delivery approach set out in Sections 3 and 4. Deliverables were developed, tested, and refined through engagement with local authorities and the Core Team at key points throughout the project. Decisions on the format, emphasis, or necessity of individual outputs were made collaboratively, ensuring that effort was focused on what would be most useful and proportionate for each area.

This section sets out the project's key deliverables in more detail and explains how three tools were applied to underpin their development and ensure they aligned with project objectives.

Core project deliverables.

Local Area Characterisations – the non-technical baseline

The purpose of the Local Area Characterisations (LAC) was to ensure that future energy planning and delivery activity was grounded in the realities of each local authority area. The LACs provided a structured way to identify the full range of factors that could enable or hinder progress on decarbonisation and net zero, ensuring that plans were informed by local context rather than technical assumptions alone. This was fundamental in ensuring that the project delivered on the objectives of the project.

An LAC was developed for each of the four participating local authority areas, with each setting out existing energy planning activity, key strengths to build upon, and the challenges and barriers that would need to be addressed to progress, providing a comprehensive non-technical baseline of where each area was at in relation to energy planning, highlighting areas of success as well as constraints related to policy, capacity, capability, finance, and stakeholder engagement.
To do this, CSE's *Walking Around the Issues* (WATI) framework was used (see "Tool 1: Walking Around the Issues (WATI) - the Enabling Environment Analysis" for further detail).

Draft LACs were a key output of the Discovery Phase and were first shared with the Core Team at the second Core Team meeting. At this meeting, it was agreed collectively that the LACs should remain live, draft documents until the end of the project, allowing insights from engagement activities undertaken during the Definition and Development Phases to be incorporated and refined over time.

The LACs were used throughout the project as a core reference point for discussion, engagement, and decision-making. They informed stakeholder conversations and were drawn upon during the development of Forward Plans to ensure that recommended actions were realistic, locally appropriate, and grounded in the specific opportunities and constraints of each area. By embedding the LAC findings into the Forward Plans, the project sought to maximise the

likelihood that proposed actions could be taken forward successfully beyond the life of the commission.

Baseline Energy Representations – the technical baseline

The Baseline Energy Representations (BERs) were developed by Regen to provide a robust technical understanding of the current energy system in each local authority area, establish a shared evidence base to support early-stage LAEP, inform engagement with stakeholders and network operators, and underpin the development of realistic and deliverable forward plans.

Each BER provides a technical overview of the local energy system, drawing primarily on nationally available datasets and, where available, locally held data. The BERs cover energy demand by sector and fuel, electricity and gas network infrastructure, low carbon energy supply, heating and buildings, transport and electric vehicle infrastructure, fuel poverty, and greenhouse gas emissions. Designed to be accessible and transparent the BERs used clear visualisations and mapping to support interpretation by non-technical audiences, while retaining sufficient technical detail to support future modelling and engagement with DSOs.

Draft BERs were shared with local authorities and the Core Team at the end of the Definition Phase, enabling emerging findings to be tested and sense-checked before finalisation. Final versions were delivered at the end of the project, alongside the Data Methodology and Gap Analysis Report.

These were used as a core engagement and decision-support tool throughout the project, helping to ground discussions on ambition, feasibility, and sequencing in a shared understanding of local system constraints and opportunities. Used alongside the LACs, the BERs directly informed the development of the forward plans, ensuring recommended actions were technically credible and aligned with local infrastructure realities. Delivered alongside the Data Methodology and Gap Analysis Report the BERs also provide a clear foundation for progression to later LAEP stages in each area.

Data Methodology and Gap Analysis Report

This report, developed by Regen, set out the methodology used to produce the BERs and identified key data gaps that would need to be addressed to support robust technical modelling in future, should local authorities choose to progress to a full Local Area Energy Plan. It was developed in direct response to local and national learning, which has shown that local authorities often face challenges when commissioning technical modelling that cannot be readily reused or built upon by other organisations.

The draft report was shared with local authorities and the Core Team at the end of the Definition Phase. Aside from providing confidence in the approach, this is a deliverable intended to support follow-on work and therefore did not directly inform project activities within this commission. It was reviewed and signed off at the end of the Project.

Data repositories

The data repositories were developed by Regen to provide each local authority with a structured, accessible store of all publicly available datasets used in the BERs. Their purpose was to ensure that data gathered through this project could be retained, reused, and built upon in future, supporting continuity and value for money should local authorities choose to progress to later stages of LAEP.

The repositories were designed in response to local authority feedback at the outset of the project, particularly interest in exploring tools such as LAEP+/LENZA or other digital twin approaches in future. For authorities without access to an existing digital twin, the repositories provide a practical foundation that can be developed further over time.

A draft version of each repository was shared with local authorities during the Definition Phase, with final versions delivered at the end of the project. As with the Data Methodology and Gap Analysis Report, the repositories were intended to support follow-on work rather than directly inform activities within this commission.

Forward Plans

A Forward Plan was developed for each local authority area to set out a clear, delivery-focused pathway for progressing local energy planning and decarbonisation activity. As the development of a full Local Area Energy Plan was outside the scope and resources of this project, the Forward Plans were not intended to be comprehensive decarbonisation blueprints. Instead, they identify a small number of priority themes for each area, with a series of recommended actions under each, alongside indicative timelines and high-level estimates of delivery costs.

Informed by evidence gathered throughout the project, the Forward Plans draw on both the non-technical LACs and the technical BERs. Developed alongside the respective local authorities through the development phase, final draft Forward Plans were shared with each local authority at the final Core Team meeting to test priorities, sequencing, and feasibility, and were refined in response to feedback from officers and senior leaders. Final versions were delivered at the end of the project.

While the project initially proposed the development of standalone Local Area Energy Visions, engagement demonstrated that these were less useful at this stage, particularly given the number of existing strategies and vision documents already in place. Local authorities instead valued clearer articulation of priorities, roles, and next steps. As a result, existing vision statements and political commitments were incorporated into the Forward Plans, ensuring continuity with established ambitions while maintaining a focus on practical, actionable outputs. In Gloucestershire, a short statement of intent was developed as an alternative mechanism to secure senior leadership buy-in for next steps following the project.

Workshop Output Summaries

The Workshop Output Summary Report captures the engagement undertaken throughout the project, summarising the different engagement methods used and variations in approach across the four local authority areas. It also includes reflections from CSE and Regen on what worked well and lessons learned, with a view to informing future replication of the approach. The report was delivered at the end of the project.

The tools used to develop the deliverables

Alongside the core deliverables, three tools were developed and applied throughout the project to support structured discussion, explore local context and opportunity, and inform decision-making. The tools were used across engagement activities with different stakeholder groups and provided a consistent framework for capturing non-technical insight alongside the technical evidence base. Collectively, they informed the LACs, BERs, and Forward Plans, ensuring outputs were grounded in local realities and delivery considerations.

Tool 1: Walking Around the Issues (WATI) - the Enabling Environment Analysis

The WATI tool was used to explore the question: what strengths can be built upon, and what barriers need to be navigated to enable progress on decarbonisation and delivery in each area? While primarily applied during the Discovery and Definition Phases, the tool was used throughout the project as a structured discussion aid for stakeholder engagement. It supported the characterisation of the local and regional "enabling environment" by building a shared understanding of the conditions required to support forward progress across the thematic areas of social consent, planning, finance and economics, delivery capabilities, and technical realities.

In practical terms, two shared Miro boards were developed and used in conversations with local stakeholders to capture emerging insight and learning (Figure 7). Each local authority had a dedicated section, with contributions colour-coded against the five WATI thematic areas, while regionally significant issues common to all four areas were captured centrally. This approach enabled both place-specific insight and meaningful regional comparison.

The outputs of the enabling environment analysis underpinned the LACs and directly informed the development of the Forward Plans. By identifying strengths, opportunities, and constraints across local, regional, and national contexts, the tool helped ensure that recommended actions were realistic, appropriately sequenced, and tailored to the specific circumstances of each area.

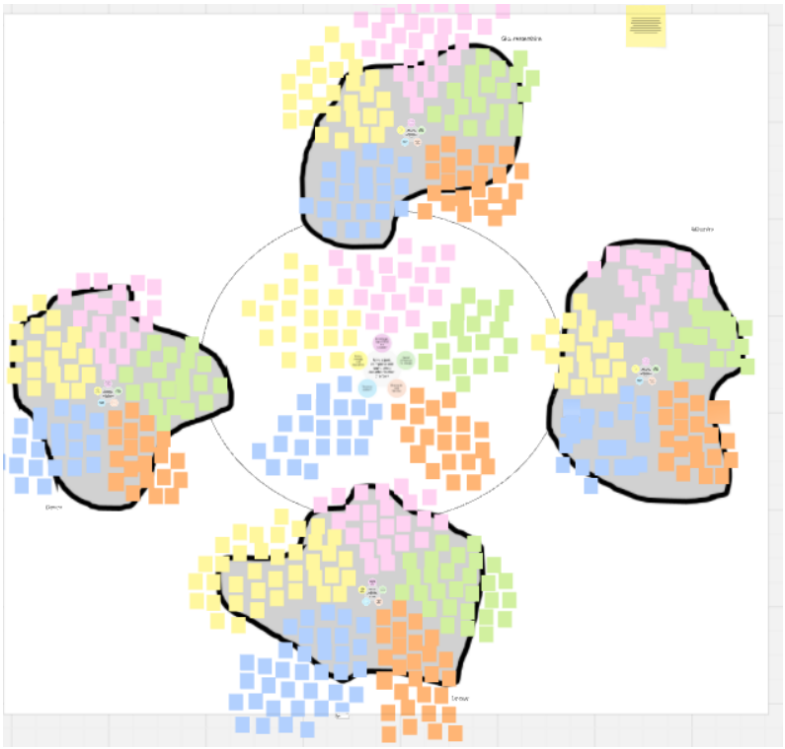

Figure 7 - Enabling Environment Analysis (CSE and Regen, 2025)

Tool 2: Visioning

The Visioning tool was designed to support open and informed discussion about the role each local authority wished to play in delivering different aspects of decarbonisation in their areas, helping to answer the question: *where does the authority want to lead, enable, or step back, given the complexity of delivery and its appetite for risk and involvement?*

The tool was primarily used in discussions and workshops with senior leaders at the respective local authorities, and in some areas with local delivery teams, during the Discovery and Definition Phases. Participants selected energy-related topics and positioned them on a matrix according to delivery complexity and the desired role of the local authority, ranging from direct delivery to enabling others. While suggested topics were provided, local authorities adapted and expanded these to reflect local priorities, including areas such as EV charging, social housing decarbonisation, council transport, hydrogen, and renewable energy at different scales.

Insights from the Visioning tool informed discussions on strategic focus, prioritisation, and sequencing, and were reflected in the Forward Plans. The tool helped clarify expectations around leadership, partnerships, and delivery models, supporting the shift away from standalone vision statements towards more practical, role-specific forward planning.

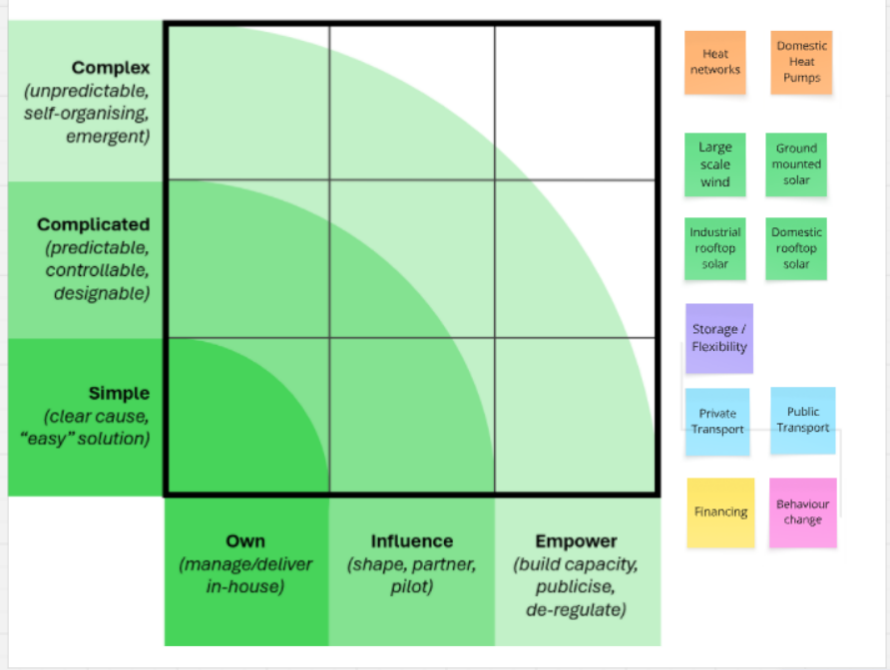

Figure 8. Visioning approach tool (CSE and Regen, 2025)

Tool 3: the capability assessment star

The capability assessment star was used to assess local authority readiness to deliver the actions identified through the project. It helped answer the question: *what capabilities are already in place in the area, and where are the key gaps that need to be addressed to progress effectively?*

The tool was used with local delivery teams and, in some cases, with key officers during the Definition and Development Phases. Participants self-assessed their position across five themes: skills, capacity, reputation, relationships, and ambition (Figure 9). For each of these themes, specific capabilities identified by the local authorities were placed on a maturity scale from "developing" to "celebrating." This tool provided a rapid, shared view of strengths and areas requiring further development in each area.

The capability assessment, included in the LAC for each area, helped inform the prioritisation, sequencing, and resourcing assumptions within the Forward Plans. By highlighting where capability constraints existed, the tool helped ensure that recommended actions were aligned with organisational readiness and that early actions focused on building the foundations needed for longer-term delivery and progression to later LAEP stages.

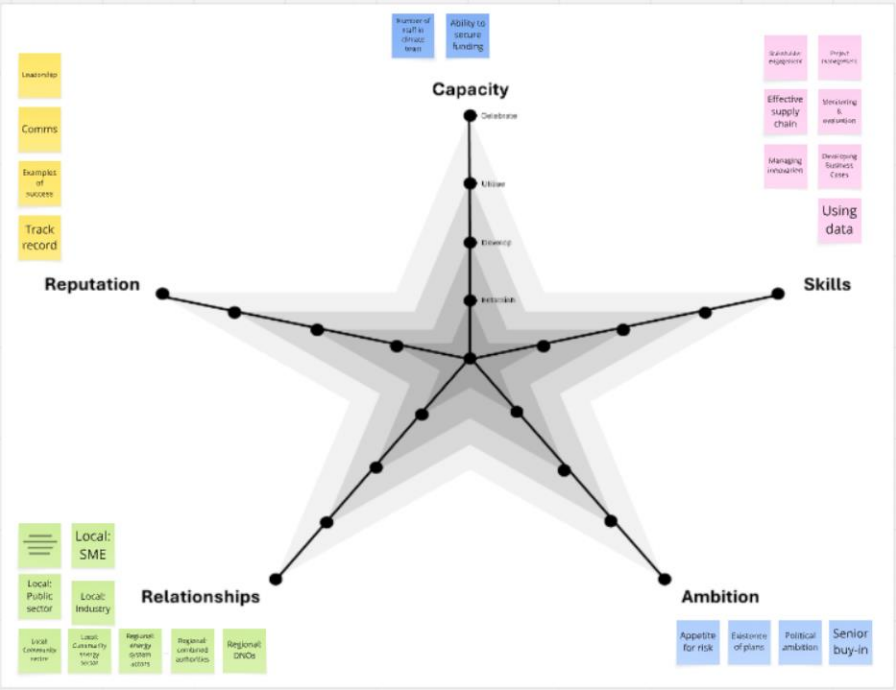

Figure 9. Capabilities assessment tool

How this enables next steps

Taken together, the outputs of the project provide a coherent, evidence-based foundation for progressing LAEP across the participating local authority areas. By combining technical baselines, non-technical insight, structured stakeholder engagement, and clear forward planning, the project delivered the core elements prioritised within Stages 1–3 of the LAEP methodology, including governance, senior and political buy-in, early consideration of delivery and finance, and the development of a consistent evidence base. In the South-West, this approach directly reflects what local authorities identified as most needed at this stage: greater confidence, capability, alignment, and shared understanding across the region. As a result, the project has delivered immediate value, supported regional collaboration and consistency, and placed local authorities in a stronger position to commission and deliver subsequent LAEP stages in a way that is affordable, aligned, and focused on delivery.

6. Key observations and learning

As well as a robust range of deliverable and purpose-built tools, this project generated a considerable amount of learning that is relevant both to the region and more widely across the country.

The Four L's

To capture learning and evaluate the project alongside participating local authorities, a short reflective exercise was undertaken at the final Core Team meeting using the *4Ls framework* (What was Liked, Learned, Lacked and Longed for) (Agile Alliance, 2015) [8]and the outputs from this activity are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5 - Outputs of the 4Ls activity undertaken at Core Team 4

What the Core Team Loved	• The collective insight, shared experience, and knowledge gained through working across multiple local authorities, with learning from peers consistently highlighted as a key benefit of the regional approach. • The flexible and agile delivery approach, including open communication from CSE and Regen's area leads. Several Core Team members particularly valued the willingness to adapt the project timeline where needed. • The focus on both technical and non-technical baselining, which helped build understanding, ambition, and buy-in locally, supported by the use of shared tools such as the Miro board. • The Forward Plans, which all local authorities identified as the most useful project output, providing sufficient detail to support next steps. The data repositories were also highly valued as a single, accessible source for all data used during the project.
What the Core Team Learned	• That each area has distinct characteristics and priorities, reinforcing the need for a flexible approach rather than a one-size-fits-all model. This was particularly emphasised by National Grid Electricity Distribution. • That focusing on Stages 1–3 of LAEP before commissioning a full plan made sense, with participants recognising the value of energy planning as a process as well as an end product.

[8] Agile Alliance (2015) *The 4Ls Retrospective Technique*. Available at: https://www.agilealliance.org/glossary/4ls/ (Accessed: 14 January 2026)

	• That having governance arrangements and delivery teams in place prior to the project significantly supported effective engagement and feedback, compared to starting from scratch. • That the overall project approach worked well and could be replicated for other local authorities, both in the region and more widely.
What the Core Team felt the project Lacked	• More case studies of energy planning activity from other local authorities, including both successes and challenges. • Clearer and more explicit links between the baselining documents (LACs and BERs) and the Forward Plans. [9] • Greater engagement with local business communities in some areas, where capacity constraints limited the depth of engagement achieved. • Sustained engagement momentum with key stakeholders, which was challenging due to limited internal capacity within local authorities and the time required for stakeholders to review and absorb project outputs.
What the Core Team Longed for	• Greater involvement from the NESO and RESP teams through the Core Team meetings. • Stakeholder mapping exercises undertaken with local delivery teams rather than at Core Team level, which was felt would have been more directly useful for local authorities. • Greater spatial granularity in the LACs and BERs for two-tier authorities, particularly at district level. • Deeper engagement with key internal teams such as planning, transport, and economic development, recognising that time and capacity constraints were a limiting factor.

Key learnings and insight

These delivery partner learnings build on, and complement, the reflections captured from the Core Team at the end of the project. While Core Team feedback focused on participant experience and project outcomes, the five key learnings and insights below draw on CSE's and Regen's perspective as delivery partners, informed both by this commission and by experience of supporting early-stage LAEP and related energy strategy work across a wide range of local authorities nationally. Together, they reflect patterns observed consistently across different geographies and governance contexts and provide transferable learning for future LAEP activity within the Southwest and more widely.

[9] *Note: this feedback was addressed in the final versions of the deliverables.*

Key Learning 1: Non-technical insight was essential in this process and the development of Forward Plans

The project demonstrated that technical baselining alone is insufficient to support effective LAEP. Integrating insight on governance, organisational capacity, political context, delivery capability, and stakeholder dynamics alongside technical evidence was critical to ensuring outputs were realistic, locally owned, and capable of informing delivery-focused Forward Plans.

Key learning 2: Tools were most effective as structured facilitation mechanisms rather than standalone outputs.

The Enabling Environment Analysis (WATI), Visioning, and Capability Assessment tools delivered greatest value when used to structure discussion, test assumptions, and support shared understanding, rather than as s. Their use enabled open and informed conversations about ambition, risk, roles, and sequencing, helping local authorities to articulate practical next steps aligned with their readiness and context.

Key learning 3: Clear framing of purpose and scope improved the quality of engagement.

Engagement was most productive where participants clearly understood the purpose of the activity, how their input would be used, and how it related to future LAEP stages. Being transparent about scope, constraints, and the distinction between early-stage LAEP (Stages 1–3) and later technical optimisation helped generate more focused, actionable feedback and manage expectations.

Key learning 4: Sustaining engagement momentum requires alignment with local authority capacity.

Maintaining momentum across a multi-month project was challenging where local authority teams faced capacity constraints. This reinforced the importance of designing engagement approaches, timelines, and expectations that are proportionate to available resource, and of recognising that effective stakeholder engagement itself requires time and capability within local authorities.

Key learning 5: Early consideration of capability, governance, and sequencing strengthens delivery outcomes.

The strongest Forward Plans were those where governance arrangements, delivery capacity, and sequencing were considered early, rather than treated as downstream issues. Embedding capability assessment within early-stage LAEP activity helped shift focus from aspirational targets to credible, prioritised actions, improving readiness to progress to later LAEP stages in a cost-effective and delivery-focused way.

7. Moving forwards: next steps and recommendations

To capitalise on the insight and momentum generated through this project, a number of recommendations are outlined in this section. With the exception of the first recommendation, aimed at the Core Team from this project, these recommendations are intended to both inform next step actions in the region, whilst providing food for thought for others exploring solutions to similar challenges across the country.

Recommendation 1: Progress opportunities for collective action in the region [Local specific]

As a key deliverable, a Forward Plan was developed for each respective area setting out key priorities and recommended actions for them to take forwards. With increased regional collaboration a key objective of this project, there are a number of focus areas where the SWNZH could support progress by facilitating regional solutions, be that through similar projects or by developing specific capabilities or services to meet needs.

Focus Area 1: Upskilling councils and strengthening capability.

Support local authorities to establish and sustain effective energy planning governance groups, drawing on existing models such as Devon's and adapting them where appropriate. This should be complemented by a consistent skills and capability gap analysis across participating authorities to identify existing strengths and priority gaps.

Based on identified needs, the SWNZH could coordinate targeted support, including officer upskilling programmes, shared or cross-authority roles, and practical training materials. Priority topics include understanding the role of the RESP, planning policy and decision-making for onshore wind, communications and engagement (particularly with elected members and internal teams), and balancing heritage and conservation considerations with energy planning objectives.

Focus Area 2: Increasing renewable energy deployment.

Provide targeted support to help local authorities strengthen pro-renewable policies within Local Plans, including sharing best practice from other areas and offering bespoke support to planning policy teams. This should include exploring ways to give greater weight to shared ownership and community benefit models.

To support a more strategic and consistent approach across the region, renewable energy assessments could be brought up to a common standard, with gaps addressed to create a clearer picture of renewable potential in the Southwest. Building on this evidence, local energy strategies could be developed to identify preferred locations and technologies through a combination of data analysis and local engagement.

In addition, the Hub could support the rollout of Future Energy Landscapes (CSE, 2023) or similar engagement frameworks to help local authorities begin building viable local project pipelines.

Focus Area 3: Retrofit and buildings decarbonisation

Local authorities are facing a range of forthcoming policy changes, including the Future Homes Standard, updates to MEES regulations, Awab's Law, and the introduction of Heat Network Zoning. Targeted support may be needed to help officers understand the implications of these changes and their role in implementation.

Heritage and conservation were consistently identified as barriers to retrofit. The Hub could support local authorities by facilitating knowledge-sharing and best practice with organisations such as Historic England and Natural England, helping planning teams navigate retrofit in sensitive contexts while maintaining momentum on decarbonisation.

Focus Area 4: RESP and network engagement.

Local authorities expressed a strong desire to continue strengthening relationships with DNOs and NESO. The Hub could support this by facilitating regular, structured engagement at regional or county level and helping maintain clear communication channels.

Further support could also be provided to help local authorities engage a wider set of external stakeholders—such as large energy users and generators—and to establish clear processes for feeding local intelligence into Distribution Future Energy Scenarios (DFES) and RESP requests for information.

Focus Area 5: Data use and management.

The Hub could play a coordinating role in supporting data sharing between local authorities and other stakeholders, alongside the development of practical case studies demonstrating how data tools such as the project data repositories and platforms like LENZA/LAEP+ can be used effectively.

Given ongoing capacity constraints, additional support may also be needed to help local authorities manage and maintain data over time. This could include in-house support via the Hub, resourcing options for local authorities, or support with procuring suitable third-party data management solutions.

Recommendation 2: Prioritise delivery of LAEP Stages 1–3

Learning from this project has demonstrated the value of focusing on Stages 1–3 of LAEP as a standalone and meaningful phase of work. Feedback from participating local authorities through the 4Ls evaluation reinforced that these stages provide a proportionate, lower-cost approach that is less dependent on complex technical modelling and more resilient to ongoing change in the national and regional energy planning landscape.

Stages 1–3 enable local authorities to build the essential foundations for effective delivery, including governance, stakeholder alignment, senior and political buy-in, and a shared technical and non-technical evidence base. They also offer a more achievable route in the short term for authorities with constrained capacity and funding, while still generating immediate value and momentum.

To support stronger and more consistent foundations for LAEP nationally, there is a clear role for national actors to provide targeted resource and funding to enable local authorities to undertake Stages 1–3, even where progression to full technical modelling is not yet feasible.

Recommendation 3: Seek opportunities for sub-regional approaches.

Learning from this project demonstrates the value of adopting sub-regional approaches to early-stage LAEP. Working across multiple local authorities enabled shared learning, peer support, and economies of scale, while also supporting greater consistency in approach and outputs. Participating authorities consistently highlighted the benefit of learning from neighbouring areas facing similar challenges and operating within shared energy and infrastructure systems.

The role of the SWNZH was central to the success of this approach. As an established regional body with a clear mandate, the Hub provided coordination, continuity, and credibility, and was well placed to support alignment with regional stakeholders and to help local authorities take forward the actions identified in their Forward Plans. This model is not unique to the Southwest and has also been successfully applied by the Greater London Authority (GLA) through the Regional Energy Accelerator, demonstrating its wider applicability and effectiveness in supporting local delivery at scale.

Recommendation 4: Adopt a "do with, not for" approach.

A key learning from this project is that the value of early-stage LAEP lies not only in the outputs produced, but in the process of delivery itself. LAEP is most effective when treated as a learning journey that builds the confidence, skills, and capability of local authority officers and partners, rather than as a technical product delivered on their behalf. This approach helps ensure that plans are better understood, more robust, and more likely to be owned and taken forward in practice.

The project demonstrated that Stages 1–3 of the LAEP methodology are well within the capability of local authorities to undertake themselves, provided they have access to appropriate tools, data, and light-touch external facilitation. Supporting local authorities to lead this work, make informed decisions, and apply learning to future delivery creates more sustainable outcomes and reduces reliance on repeated external commissioning.

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List of acronyms

BER	Baseline Energy Representation
CSE	Centre for Sustainable Energy
DESNZ	Department for Energy Security and Net Zero
DFES	Distribution Future Energy Scenarios
DNO	Distribution Network Operator
DSO	Distribution System Operator
ESC	Energy Systems Catapult
GDN	Gas Distribution Network
GLA	Greater London Authority
LA	Local Authority
LAEP	Local Area Energy Planning
NESO	National Energy System Operator
RESP	Regional Energy Strategic Planning
SWNZH	South West Net Zero Hub
WATI	Walking Around the Issues
WEMCA	West of England Mayoral Combined Authority