

Getting the union voice heard on green jobs and skills

A trade union guide to action on local authority retrofit and energy

Background

The Greener Jobs Alliance has been making the case for union engagement on jobs and skills ever since we started campaigning over 10 years ago. In 2020 we published *Engaging with regional and local authorities on climate change* ¹. This was the time when many councils were declaring climate emergencies and committing to net-zero targets. Two years later around 93 per cent of the population in Britain lives in areas where the local authorities – over 525 councils all together – have declared a climate emergency ².

The problem with most of these policies is that they were drawn up with no consultation with the workforce or the wider trade union movement. Another concern, is that examination of the policies linked to these declarations, is that they lack the measures needed to meet the targets. ³

The climate policy decisions made by councils will directly impact on both council workers and union members in the community. It is essential that they influence these decisions. This guide is designed to help unions make the case for genuine worker engagement.

The focus in the guide is on a sector that currently has the potential to create thousands of new jobs and boost skills – the construction industry.

The guide is in 2 parts:

1. Information on why trade unions need to get involved
2. Action points to help take the issue up in your local authority

Part 1 - Reasons to get involved

Maximising opportunities in the construction sector

'By 2025, around 700,000 homes will be upgraded, and by 2050 all our buildings will be energy efficient with low carbon heating.' The British energy security strategy April 2022 ⁴.

The triple win of energy efficiency measures – jobs, tackling climate change, and reducing fuel poverty - is well known, yet progress has been painfully slow. The Government has consistently talked up the benefits of action on energy efficiency but if there was a prize for empty promises they would win hands down.

The Climate Change Progress Report for 2022 is a damning indictment of the failure of Government policy. *'Sharply rising fuel costs should have given added impetus to improving energy efficiency, yet the necessary programmes are not in place. We are still building new homes that do not meet minimum standards of efficiency and will require significant retrofitting. Not only are we waiting for the promised Future Homes Standard but there is as yet no sign of the changes in the planning system necessary to reflect Britain's legal obligations for climate mitigation.'* The Climate Change Committee Report June 2022 ⁵

It concludes that the government's current insulation programme is "shocking".

Local and regional authorities need to step up

'To meet our climate targets, we need to retrofit at least 19 million homes by 2030 and make all our housing zero carbon by 2050'.

The New Economics Foundation *Great Homes Upgrade* report September 2021 ⁶. NEF has also produced a toolkit on how to campaign with examples of good local authority practice. It calls on councils to set up a Retrofit Taskforce. ⁷

We recognise that the absence of a properly funded and coherent government programme creates difficulties for any local authority that wants to fill the void. The huge variations in local authority performance on retrofit means that there are still opportunities to generate skills and jobs in the green economy providing there is the political will.

Union involvement

*'Employers and sector bodies should set out business and skills plans for the net zero transition, **engaging unions and workers**'*

This is one of the 15 recommendations of the Government endorsed Green Jobs Taskforce. ⁸

Despite this there is very little evidence that this is being done. In 2022 the TUC in conjunction with the Greener Jobs Alliance conducted Just Transition surveys in 2 regions of the UK – Yorkshire + Humberside, and London. For a report visit the GJA website. ⁹

There are different reasons for this lack of consultation by local authorities ranging from:

- a) the union requested consultation but it was refused
- b) consultation not requested due to:

~ lack of capacity in the branch or trades union council to take it forward

~ lack of priority due to other pressing issues

~ lack of information about what is seen as a complex issue and therefore a reluctance to take it on.

This guide is an attempt to help unions address some of these problems.

Skills - A key to progress on retrofit is aligning the demand for employment with a skilled workforce in the local economy. This is not easy partly due to the time lag in getting people qualified compared to the demand for labour. That is why forward planning is essential. Government policy and funding flip flops that have occurred over the last 12 years and counting make this difficult, but every local authority needs to be linked into a Further Education College, Construction Skills Academy or similar institution that covers the range of skills needed for energy efficiency and retrofit work. These include:

- Retrofit co-ordinators and assessors,
- Gas engineers, plumbing and heating technicians with the skills to install and retrofit air and ground source heat and hydrogen pumps,
- Electrical installation and maintenance roles to install and retrofit electric vehicles (EV) charging points, photovoltaic (PV) solar panels, and other electronic green technologies
- Building design and building information system advisors
- Waste and recycling management
- Energy insulation installers
- Roofers

Finance - The delegation of adult education budgets to local and regional authorities needs to be coupled with the maximisation of housing and energy funding streams. Checking on progress with Local Skills Improvement Plans and the work of Local Enterprise Partnerships should form part of this approach. The ever-changing landscape of government energy efficiency funding like the Social Housing Decarbonisation fund needs to be acted on.

Skills Gap – One to Avoid

Councils need to avoid the experience of two West Midlands councils who had to return more than £900,000 of government funding for green homes upgrades, after a shortage of labour and skills meant it could not be spent. [Councils to return £900,000 in unspent government grants | Public Finance](#) April 2022

Inequalities – A union campaign on retrofit skills and jobs provides an opportunity to address the lack of diversity in the construction sector. Council programmes will need to be monitored to ensure that recruitment to training and jobs reflects the demographic of the local population. Programmes that support the participation of women and BAME communities will need to be adopted. Priority support needs to go to low-income households and those least able to pay for the changes that will reduce energy bills.

Public ownership – Experience has shown that a reliance on the market will not deliver at the scale needed to meet local and national targets. While trying to leverage the best possible outcomes under the current policy landscape, unions and local authorities need to make the case for public ownership models on energy. Bringing housing and construction back into public sector direct labour organisations will offer the co-ordination needed at scale. The example of Glasgow City Council provided in the NEF toolkit ⁷ illustrates what can be achieved with the political will. Exploring the potential for community energy is something that unions will need to consider. ¹⁰

Part 2 - Getting started

What is the current state of play?

1. Discuss the issue of green jobs and skills in your union branch and / or trades union council. Check if the union has ever been consulted by the local authority on green jobs and skills.
2. Appoint at least one member to find out some background information on council climate policy. Check who the leader of the council is and the cabinet member responsible for climate action.
3. Consider sending written questions to these 2 councillors. You can adapt the TUC surveys referenced above
4. Go on the website to obtain climate emergency plans. If these are not available directly contact your councillor to find out how they can be accessed.
5. Check if any of the policies cover what is happening on retrofit and skills in your local authority and region. Identify any actions listed and the organisations tasked with taking them forward.

Questions to ask your local authority

Ask for a meeting with the climate and housing cabinet leads on your council covering the 10 topics below:

1. **Funding** - What is your assessment of the current funding available to pursue an ambitious programme of retrofit, renewable energy generation and construction of energy efficient affordable homes? What funding mechanisms will you be exploring in the short-term as well as in the next 4 years to increase the resources available? For example, will you be bidding for Wave 2 of the Social Housing Decarbonisation fund?
2. **Delivery** - Are you actively pursuing a policy of establishing a direct labour organisation within the Council to retrofit existing buildings and build new social housing?

3. **Skills** - What provision do you intend to make to ensure that local people acquire the skills needed to take advantage of a growing green economy? How will you be linking up with FE Colleges and other training providers in the area?
4. **Supply chains and Procurement** - How will you strengthen the requirement to ensure that existing contractors meet acceptable standards on the living wage, union rights, employment of a local workforce, and environment / climate policies?
5. **Equalities** - How will you set about addressing some of the social justice aspects of the green economy? For example, the lack of job opportunities for women in construction.
6. **Targets** – What targets do you have for retrofitting social housing? What targets do you have for retrofitting all properties in the borough?
7. **Jobs** - Have you estimated the number of workers needed to deliver the targets? What new jobs will be needed and in what trades to deliver these targets? How will this data be aligned to current skills provision to ensure the necessary training, including upskilling, is in place?
8. **Energy advice and information service** - Will you be providing a service for employers, landlords and householders to access, which stimulates demand in support of the targets?
9. **Climate emergency policies and action plans** - What procedures do you have for updating the policy commitments on green jobs and skills that reflect the issues raised here?
10. **Trade union and community involvement** - What mechanisms will you employ to ensure that recognised unions in the Council, and bodies like local trades unions councils, are engaged in housing and climate policy at an early stage? Will you be establishing a Retrofit Taskforce?

Good luck and please keep us informed of your progress by contacting [gjacom@gmail.com](mailto:gjacoms@gmail.com)

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Sources of information

- 1 [GJA-Guidance-doc.pdf \(greenerjobsalliance.co.uk\)](#)
- 2 [Climate emergency declarations in 2,116 jurisdictions and local governments cover 1 billion citizens - Climate Emergency Declaration](#)
- 3 [Council climate plan scorecards | Declare a Climate Emergency](#)
- 4 [British energy security strategy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- 5 [2022 Progress Report to Parliament - Climate Change Committee \(theccc.org.uk\)](#)
- 6 [Great Homes Upgrade | New Economics Foundation](#)
- 7 [Great Homes Upgrade campaign toolkit - Google Docs](#)
- 8 [Green Jobs Taskforce \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)
- 9 [Greener Jobs Alliance | DEMANDING CLIMATE JUSTICE](#)
- 10 Community energy - [Policy Discussion Paper — Power for People](#)