

# Case study: Dorset Council Grid Enquiry

---

04/07/2024



## About Regen

Regen provides independent, evidence-led insight and advice in support of our mission to transform the UK's energy system for a net zero future. We focus on analysing the systemic challenges of decarbonising power, heat and transport. We know that a transformation of this scale will require engaging the whole of society in a just transition.

Regen is also a membership organisation, managing the Regen members network and the Electricity Storage Network (ESN) – the voice of the UK storage industry. We have over 150 members who share our mission, including clean energy developers, businesses, local authorities, community energy groups, academic institutions, and research organisations across the energy sector.

## Authors

**Alex Robertson**

[arobertson@regen.co.uk](mailto:arobertson@regen.co.uk)

**Poppy Maltby**

[pmaltby@regen.co.uk](mailto:pmaltby@regen.co.uk)

## Acknowledgements

Regen would like to thank Carl Warom of Dorset Council, whose insights and learnings from leading this grid enquiry have informed the case study.

# Summary

---

In late 2023 and early 2024, a Dorset Council scrutiny committee undertook a ‘grid enquiry’ to gather evidence on challenges around local network constraints. Through a series of in-depth workshops, councillors reviewed the problem and explored impacts and solutions, drawing upon the insights of dozens of local stakeholders and subject matter experts.

A key outcome has been to grow awareness of both councillors and officers across the council on energy network challenges, leading to a clear mandate to develop a Local Area Energy Plan and to strengthen the council’s strategic relationship with network companies. As such, officers have expressed that sustained focus on grid constraints served as a helpful route to develop support and enthusiasm for energy planning – as well as growing awareness among councillors and officers alike on the strategic opportunities of the future energy system.

This case study details Dorset Council’s approach and the organisation’s reflections and learnings from the process.

# Origin and objectives

---

The need for a grid enquiry exercise emerged organically for Dorset Council. As instances of grid-related challenges grew in frequency, both councillors and officers became increasingly aware of issues in connecting to the electricity network facing organisations and businesses across the county.

In early 2023, representatives of the Places and Resources Scrutiny Committee convened with sustainability, planning and economic development team officers to discuss a way forward. Recognising that the complexity of the issue required a new approach to scrutiny, they established an eight-person task and finish group, led by the scrutiny chair and supported by the sustainability team. The group was cross-party to ensure stronger buy-in to the eventual recommendations.

It set out three key objectives:

1. Grow understanding and awareness of the issues to enable better engagement and advocacy
2. Gather evidence from key stakeholders on local impacts and possible solutions
3. Strengthen links with network operators and form a more comprehensive view of how the council could best mitigate risks and exploit opportunities for Dorset.

In scoping the review's objectives, the council realised it needed to limit the focus to electricity grid constraints, rather than broader energy system challenges, to keep it manageable and on the development and economic impacts, to garner interest and avoid being pigeonholed as 'just an environmental sustainability' issue.

“There are many energy system issues we could address, from deployment of renewables, energy storage, low-carbon technologies and gas network transitions. Still, a full examination was always going to be too much for a single exercise. Importantly, grid constraints are a clear problem – and a problem for net zero, development and economic growth alike – so a valuable entry point to motivate energy planning as a solution.”

– Carl Warom, Dorset Council



# Delivering the review

---

## Format

The review itself consisted of five in-person workshops between October 2023 and January 2024: one introductory session, three evidence sessions and a final review. The timing was chosen to coincide with the expected emergence of major national policy announcements on items including the RESP and national transmission and connection action plans.

The five workshops were held over an afternoon, but even 3-4 hours often proved insufficient, given the amount of discussion generated, with many sessions overrunning. Every session involved the corporate directors for sustainability, planning, and economic growth, who helped provide senior-level direction and action.

## Workshop topics and approach

### Session 1: Introduction and background briefing

This workshop was dedicated to setting out and agreeing the parameters of the review and delivering a background briefing on the key terms, roles and processes to the task and finish group. External support was provided by the South West Net Zero Hub and Regen to offer expert insight on the topic.

#### Learning:

“One thing that became clear was that, even while the issue was on the radar, there is generally a very low-level awareness of the detail, scale and scope of the challenge. Having external expertise in the introductory session made a difference throughout the review process, with people constantly referring to the insights shared in that session. Having a bit of external authority in that scene setter helped establish a solid level of understanding and the group’s confidence, which was indispensable for the evidence-gathering phase.”

– Carl Warom, Dorset Council



## **Session 2: Evidence from council stakeholders**

This workshop was dedicated to gathering evidence from within the council, convening cabinet members and officers from relevant teams to share insights and experiences. Key teams included sustainability, transport, and property and planning to offer comprehensive evidence on the authority's experiences dealing with grid constraints.

It became clear that questioning could go in wildly different directions, given the complexity of the issue. Officers provided guidance on possible future lines of questioning, kept an issues tracker and visualised different lines of inquiry, which helped give clarity and strategic direction. Also key was empowering the chair to maintain focus on the primary issues under review.

## **Session 3: Evidence from local stakeholders**

In this session local stakeholders provided evidence of their experience with grid constraints in Dorset. The council cast a wide net to include a range of relevant sectors, using existing relationships and background research to identify stakeholders.

Representatives included:

- Renewable developers (large and small scale)
- Retrofit organisations
- EV charge point installers and operators
- Housing developers and housing associations
- Community energy initiatives
- Public sector partners
- Business representatives, including high energy-using businesses.

The corporate directors for both economic growth and strategy, performance and sustainability were present so that the broader implications of facing grid challenges were understood from a social, economic and environmental perspective.

### **Learning:**

Sector-specific jargon can make it difficult to engage people due to its technical nature and individual apathy towards the topic. Building interest and enthusiasm for delivering solutions to local energy challenges therefore requires raising awareness of the scale and significance of the barriers. Combining data (constraint maps and forecasts) and real-life case studies helped to paint a compelling story of the barriers local people are facing and building passionate consensus for the council seeking solutions to grid constraints.



#### **Session 4: Evidence from network stakeholders**

This session was informed by the previous workshops and focused on understanding the role and perspectives of organisations responsible for the county's electricity network. Representatives were invited from National Grid Electricity Distribution (NGED) and Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks (SSEN) as the two distribution network operators (DNOs) serving the council area.

The session looked at the impact of some of the significant reforms currently under way from both Ofgem and the government and explored ways to address barriers moving forward collaboratively.

#### **Learning:**

After discussing the challenges, the central focus of the review was to engage councillors in discussions that viewed energy, development and transport as a triad of interlinked strategic spatial issues in which the council has a critical interest. While local authorities currently play a more peripheral strategic role in the energy system, the discussions with network operators helped emphasise the opportunity for them to play a more active role in local and regional energy planning.

#### **Session 5: Review of the findings and recommendations**

The final session brought together council stakeholders and the scrutiny committee to discuss the findings of the review and discussed recommendations for next steps.

#### **Learning:**

Alongside detailed minutes of the discussions, Dorset Council kept an issues tracker throughout the review which ensured the wide range of experiences and insights captured during the evidence session could be easily reidentified and analysed to inform the summary findings and recommendations.



## **Organisational resource**

The review was relatively resource light, with no requirements beyond staff time – and a single officer supporting the sessions with briefing notes and analysis. The outputs of this officer’s work included:

- Initial scoping and terms of reference for the review
- Detailed materials, agendas and slides for each of the five workshop sessions
- In-depth briefing materials and suggested areas of questioning for officers and councillors, which was important to ensure engagement
- Collation of evidence and management of issues tracker
- Development of recommendations and final report.

Further human resource was required from officers and councillors participating in the five workshop sessions of between 3 and 4 hours.





# Outcomes and next steps

---

A key outcome of the review was that it significantly enhanced the understanding of energy and the importance of the energy network for the council and its objectives for both councillors and officers.

Officers emphasised that, as an experiment in a new way of doing scrutiny – giving a sustained and intense focus to a single issue across multiple devoted sessions – it was a great success, albeit at times intense. Councillors and officers came away with a much richer understanding, and it enabled the participating councillors to act as more confident and vocal advocates on the issue.

Now Dorset Council is seeking to maintain the positive momentum, taking steps to act on the recommendations set out in the review. Most importantly, the exercise secured clear cross-party support and senior officer buy-in to progress a LAEP, develop more strategic relationships with network companies, and to maintain it as an explicit area of ongoing scrutiny attention. As such, it was a helpful foundational step in the LAEP process.

Consequently, Dorset Council is now working with the SW Net Zero Hub, alongside a group of South West local authorities, to progress a LAEP, and will shortly be recruiting a dedicated officer to develop it.





Regen  
Bradinch Court,  
Castle St,  
Exeter  
EX4 3PL

01392 494 399  
[www.regen.co.uk](http://www.regen.co.uk)

**04/07/2024**