



association for public service excellence

Energy wise

Staff behaviour change and energy efficiency in council buildings

Turn me off before you go-go!

Sung in the tune of the 1984 Wham! hit, Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go

Please turn off equipment and lights
before leaving this meeting room.

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Why staff behaviour matters.....	4
3	Approaches being adopted by local authorities	5
3.1	Awareness and communication campaigns.....	5
3.2	Energy champions, staff networks and peer influence.....	6
3.3	Governance, policy and accountability.....	7
3.4	Data, feedback and visibility.....	8
4	Measuring success	9
5	APSE Energy: Supporting local authorities on energy management	10
6	Supporting behaviour change through training.....	11
7	Leisure facilities: A particular opportunity	12
8	Conclusion.....	13
8.1	Key lessons for local authorities.....	14

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Energy wise: Staff behaviour change and energy efficiency in council buildings

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1 Introduction

Reducing energy consumption has become an increasingly important priority for local authorities. Rising energy costs and ongoing budget pressures are encouraging councils to explore all opportunities to improve energy efficiency across their estates.

Though investment in technologies such as heat pumps, solar PV, LED lighting and building management systems remains important, the behaviour of building users continues to play a big role in determining overall energy performance. Everyday actions such as switching off equipment, reporting energy faults, managing heating appropriately and reducing unnecessary energy use can collectively have a meaningful impact on both costs and carbon emissions.

APSE Energy's [Energy Across the Authority](#) publications highlight how councils across the UK are delivering practical climate action through energy efficiency, renewable energy generation, retrofit programmes, energy monitoring and behaviour change initiatives. A recurring theme within this work is that technology alone rarely delivers maximum savings without appropriate management and behaviour change.

Following an enquiry from a member council regarding staff behaviour change and energy reduction, APSE issued a [network query](#) to gather examples of current practice from across local government. The responses highlighted a range of approaches being adopted by councils, providing valuable insight into what is working in practice and the lessons that can be shared across the sector.

2 Why staff behaviour matters

Reducing energy consumption is increasingly important at a time when councils continue to face financial and operational pressures.

The [*APSE State of the Market Survey on Sports and Leisure Management 2026*](#) found that 65% of local authorities expect improvements in energy management to form part of their response to ongoing financial pressures. The same survey found that many authorities continue to experience rising utility costs, with 26% reporting increases of between 11% and 25% over the previous year.

Whilst efficient technologies are important, the experiences of councils demonstrate that building occupants continue to influence energy performance through everyday decisions. Heating schedules, lighting use, equipment left on standby, windows left open and unnecessary energy consumption can all diminish the benefits achieved through capital investment.

Behaviour change therefore offers councils a relatively low-cost opportunity to support wider energy management objectives.

3 Approaches being adopted by local authorities

The network responses reveal four broad approaches being used across local government.

3.1 Awareness and communication campaigns

The most common approach involves awareness raising through posters, screensavers, staff newsletters and internal communications.



Derby City Council: Room signage and screensavers

Derby City Council reported using meeting room signage and screensavers encouraging staff to switch off equipment when not in use. Communications highlighted that simply avoiding leaving monitors on standby could save approximately £35,000 per year. While the issue has not been eliminated entirely, the campaign helped to embed awareness among staff.



Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council: Communications campaign

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council developed a broader communications campaign featuring posters, intranet resources, weekly messaging, lunch-and-learn sessions and practical guidance for building managers. The campaign linked behavioural messages to financial savings and reported small but measurable reductions in energy consumption across key buildings.



Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council: "Think Before You Print"

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council's IT team delivered a "Think Before You Print" campaign, promoted through the staff newsletter and intranet. The initiative encouraged employees to consider whether printing was necessary and contributed to the rationalisation of printer provision across the organisation.

3.2 Energy champions, staff networks and peer influence

Several councils highlighted the value of using staff networks and champions to promote behavioural change.



Derbyshire County Council: "Energy Champions" group

Derbyshire County Council established an "Energy Champions" group consisting of volunteers who help generate ideas, promote messages and encourage colleagues to adopt energy-saving behaviours. Activities have included promoting equipment switch-off campaigns, sustainable transport initiatives and awareness materials. However, the authority noted that maintaining momentum can be challenging where staff resources are limited.

The use of champions reflects wider lessons emerging from environmental sustainability work across local government



Newport City Council: Energy Sparks and Staff Network

Newport City Council has reported positive results in schools through Energy Sparks, an online platform that enables pupils and staff to monitor energy use in real time and identify opportunities to reduce consumption. The platform supports wider decarbonisation measures, including air source heat pumps and solar PV installations. Working in partnership with the charity Awel Aman Tawe, the Council also delivers workshops to help schools understand the platform and take practical action. Newport reports that schools receiving workshops typically demonstrate higher levels of engagement.

Newport's Climate Change Staff Network performs a similar function to Derbyshire's, providing a forum for discussion and helping to maintain visibility of sustainability issues throughout the organisation.

3.3 Governance, policy and accountability

Perhaps the strongest example emerging from the network query comes from Aberdeenshire Council.



Aberdeenshire Council: Formal Heating Policy

Rather than relying solely upon awareness raising, Aberdeenshire introduced a formal Heating Policy setting out clear responsibilities, operating schedules and temperature parameters across the council estate. The policy was developed through engagement with services, trade unions and elected members and established designated Responsible Premises Officers for buildings. Importantly, it was introduced as a formal policy rather than optional guidance.

Initial analysis suggested the policy reduced council energy costs by approximately £500,000 per year. Whilst some of these savings are likely attributable to improved operational management, the example demonstrates how behaviour change can be embedded through governance arrangements and accountability structures.

The Council's experience suggests that staff behaviour initiatives may be most successful when they move beyond awareness campaigns and become part of day-to-day management practice.

3.4 Data, feedback and visibility

Several authorities emphasised the importance of providing staff and managers with access to energy data.

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council



Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council developed an energy dashboard system allowing staff to see energy consumption, costs and emissions across council buildings. Energy performance is now discussed regularly during staff meetings, helping to normalise conversations around energy use and improve accountability. The authority reported that access to data has been critical in achieving year-on-year reductions in energy use and emissions.

East Renfrewshire Council



East Renfrewshire Council highlighted how climate-related data is used across a range of functions including emissions monitoring, strategic planning, forecasting, Climate Change Impact Assessments and project evaluation. Drawing on corporate emissions data, area-wide emissions information from the Scottish Climate Intelligence Service and project-level datasets, the Council uses evidence to monitor progress against its Get to Zero Action Plan, support accountability and develop data-led business cases and case studies. The Council emphasised that regular reporting and transparent use of data helps maintain organisational focus on climate objectives.

Highland Council



The importance of visibility is reinforced by APSE Energy's most recent [Energy Across the Authority](#) publication, which highlights Highland Council's innovative energy benchmarking tool. By allowing building managers and users to compare performance across a large estate, the tool has helped identify opportunities for improvement and encouraged greater ownership of energy performance. Early examples included measurable reductions in energy consumption and utility costs.

The experiences of the above councils suggest that staff are more likely to support energy-saving initiatives when they can clearly see the impact of their actions.

4 Measuring success

A recurring issue highlighted by councils is the challenge of measuring the impact of behaviour change initiatives. While campaigns may generate engagement and discussion, demonstrating a direct relationship between awareness activity and actual reductions in energy consumption can be more difficult.

This is where benchmarking and performance measurement become important.

APSE Performance Networks' [Climate Change Module](#) enables local authorities to measure, monitor and benchmark climate performance against comparable councils across the UK. The module covers a range of areas including emissions, council buildings, vehicles, renewable energy, climate adaptation and ecological or carbon sequestration activities.

The Climate Change Module enables councils to:

- Track progress against climate commitments.
- Measure performance across council buildings.
- Benchmark outcomes against peer authorities.
- Identify opportunities for improvement.
- Learn from good practice elsewhere in local government.

Supported through interactive Power BI reporting, the module provides a practical mechanism for councils seeking to understand whether behavioural and operational initiatives are resulting in measurable improvements in energy and climate performance.

For authorities investing staff time and resources in behaviour change programmes, robust benchmarking can help demonstrate value, support business cases and strengthen climate governance arrangements.

5 APSE Energy: Supporting local authorities on energy management

APSE Energy provides local authorities with practical support, independent advice and opportunities for peer learning across a wide range of energy and climate-related issues. Through a programme of events, technical briefings, research publications and networking opportunities, APSE Energy helps councils stay informed about emerging policy developments, new technologies and examples of good practice from across the sector.

The APSE Energy events programme provides a regular forum for officers, elected members and sector partners to share experiences and discuss common challenges. Recent [events and webinars](#) have covered topics including fleet decarbonisation, domestic retrofit, heat networks, housing improvement, energy partnerships, financing projects and practical approaches to reducing energy use. Alongside major events such as the APSE Energy Summit, regular online sessions enable councils to learn directly from authorities and organisations delivering innovative projects and initiatives.

APSE Energy also produces a substantial range of briefings and publications designed to support evidence-based decision-making. During [2026](#), briefings have examined issues such as the Warm Homes Plan, Local Power Plan, heat network zoning, Future Homes and Buildings Standards, environmental monitoring and local authority case studies. [Publications](#) including the Energy Across the Authority series provide practical examples of how councils are improving energy efficiency, reducing costs, strengthening climate resilience and delivering environmental objectives. Together, these resources help local authorities turn policy ambitions into practical action while learning from the experiences of their peers across the UK.

Explore APSE Energy's latest events, briefings and publications through the [APSE website](#).

6 Supporting behaviour change through training

Whilst many councils highlighted communications and engagement activities, relatively few referenced formal staff training.

This presents an opportunity. Awareness campaigns can encourage action, but training can help staff understand why those actions matter and how they contribute to wider organisational objectives.

APSE Training offers a range of [specialist programmes](#) covering Carbon Literacy, Climate Change and Renewable Energy. These courses help officers, managers and elected members develop a greater understanding of climate change, carbon reduction responsibilities and practical energy management approaches.

Training can support behaviour change by helping staff understand the relationship between energy use, council finances, carbon emissions and organisational climate commitments. Rather than energy reduction being viewed as an occasional campaign, training can help embed energy awareness as part of everyday working practice.

7 Leisure facilities: A particular opportunity

Although this network query focused on council buildings more broadly, APSE research suggests that leisure facilities merit particular attention given their significant energy demands.

The [APSE State of the Market Survey on Sports and Leisure Management 2026](#) found that 65% of respondents expect improved energy management to play an important role in addressing future financial pressures. Authorities reported implementing a wide range of measures including reduced pool temperatures, improved controls, heat pumps, solar PV, LED lighting and operational changes.

Similar lessons apply across other energy-intensive and operationally challenging buildings in local authority estates. For example, APSE's [Greening the Past: Decarbonising Historic Buildings](#) webinar, delivered by APSE Energy Associate Alan Barber, explored how councils can improve the energy performance of heritage assets whilst respecting their historic significance. The session highlighted that successful projects often combine technical interventions with effective building management, occupant engagement and an understanding of how buildings are actually used on a day-to-day basis.

These themes were explored further at APSE's recent Sports and Leisure Management Network meeting on [practical ways to reduce energy use in leisure facilities](#), also delivered by Alan Barber. The session highlighted how operational management and staff behaviours can complement capital investment, with particular emphasis on plant optimisation, scheduling, operational procedures and building management practices.

This reinforces a key lesson emerging from the network query: behaviour change should not be seen as separate from technical energy management. The greatest savings are often achieved when technical improvements and behavioural initiatives work together.

8 Conclusion

The responses to APSE's [network query](#) demonstrate that staff behaviour change remains one of the most accessible and cost-effective opportunities available to local authorities seeking to reduce energy use and carbon emissions.

No single intervention emerged as a universal solution. However, several common characteristics were evident across the most successful examples. Councils reporting positive outcomes typically combined communication, leadership, accountability, staff engagement and access to performance data. Recent examples from South Cambridgeshire and East Renfrewshire demonstrate that when climate and energy data are embedded within routine decision-making processes, they can help identify underperformance, support investment decisions and improve accountability for carbon reduction outcomes.

The experience of Aberdeenshire Council demonstrates the benefits of embedding energy management within formal policies and governance frameworks, while examples from Newport, Sefton, Derbyshire and Antrim and Newtownabbey highlight the value of awareness campaigns, staff champions and energy monitoring.

Combined with initiatives such as [APSE Training's](#) Carbon Literacy and Climate Change programmes, [APSE Energy](#) support services and the APSE Performance Networks [Climate Change Module](#), councils have access to a range of tools that can help turn awareness into measurable action.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that behavioural initiatives deliver the greatest benefits when they complement wider energy management strategies, helping councils reduce costs, support climate commitments and make the most of investments in low-carbon technologies and energy-efficient buildings.

8.1 Key lessons for local authorities

Several common lessons emerge from the responses.

1. Leadership matters

Senior management support appears critical to success. Behaviour change initiatives are more likely to succeed when energy management is visibly supported by leadership and integrated into organisational priorities.

2. Communication must be continuous

One-off campaigns can raise awareness but may struggle to sustain long-term behaviour change. Regular communication through multiple channels appears more effective.

3. Data drives action

Staff are more likely to engage when they can see the impact of their actions through energy monitoring and dashboards.

4. Accountability improves outcomes

The strongest reported results came from councils that clearly defined responsibility for building energy performance.

5. Training supports culture change

Carbon literacy and climate awareness training can provide staff with the knowledge and understanding needed to support long-term behavioural change.

Sign up for APSE membership to enjoy a whole range of benefits

APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular network meetings, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The networks are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Networks are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE. If you do not currently receive details about APSE Network meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

Our national networks include:-

- FM and Building Cleaning
- Catering (School Meals)
- Cemeteries and Crematoria
- Highways and Street Lighting
- Housing, Construction and Building Maintenance
- Social Value, Procurement and Commercialisation Network
- Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance
- Renewables and Climate Change
- Roads, Highways and Street Lighting
- Sports and Leisure Management
- Vehicle Maintenance and Transport
- Veterans and Military Champions Network
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