

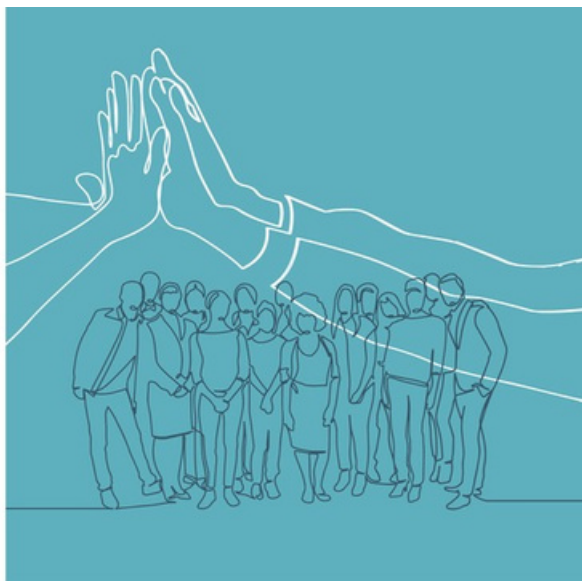
Practical Hope:

Inspiration for community action



Community guide to retrofit

What communities can do to share best practice, develop area-based projects, and use more sustainable energy



Practical Hope

**Inspiration for
Community Action**

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Introduction

Retrofitting our ageing housing stock to create warm and energy efficient homes is an urgent challenge, but success depends on the meaningful involvement of communities.

The government has committed £13 billion to its Warm Homes Plan by 2030, which aims to improve the energy efficiency of millions of homes in England.¹ Community groups have an essential role to play in building trust and confidence for people to access this funding, and in helping to imagine and deliver locally-led retrofit projects. This guide showcases the innovative action that communities are taking to make homes easier to keep warm in winter, prevent overheating in summer, and reduce their carbon emissions. It draws on this positive work to demonstrate how communities can enable retrofit solutions that go beyond individual homes and make a bigger impact. Community groups are often well placed to secure the buy-in of local residents and other organisations such as local authorities. They can bridge gaps, gather stories and share information and advice, advocating and influencing homeowners and coordinating collective action to access grants and funding.

Key benefits of community action on retrofit:

1

Build visibility and confidence in retrofit solutions.

2

Demonstrate what's possible and support hard to reach groups to retrofit their homes.

3

Create locally tailored solutions through area based retrofit schemes.

4

Negotiate retrofit services to ensure that projects respond to community interests and priorities.

Step 1: Sharing best practice and advice

Around 18% of Britain's national CO2 emissions come from heating our homes². But as 80% of the homes that we will be living in by 2050 are already built, retrofit will be needed to meet legal net zero requirements³. Retrofitting can be disruptive however, and determining the right approach for an individual home can be overwhelming. This means a key principle of community retrofit is making trustworthy information clearly available. Community groups can show people the many advantages of retrofitting alongside reducing our environmental impact, including reduced heating bills and improved thermal comfort. Locally produced guidance can suggest relatively minor and affordable building changes and help people to access funding schemes at the regional level, all while supporting people to make the right decisions. Communities have an important role to play in uniting around these benefits and showing that retrofitting works, and these case studies show inspiration groups which have accelerated local action by setting up community interest companies and other bodies to deliver advice, support and, in some cases, undertake retrofit works directly.

Case study 1: Healthy Homes Project, Frome

The Healthy Homes Project in Frome is a partnership between Frome Town Council, the Centre for Sustainable Energy, and Frome Medical Practice.² The Healthy Homes team provide a range of different services including free advice on energy saving and efficiency at regular drop-in sessions. They also organise home visits where Energy Advice Volunteers provide advice and can even install a range of smaller energy efficiency measures such as draughtproofing, radiator panels, thermal curtains, and hot water tank jackets.³ The project also facilitates the hire of specialist equipment such as thermal imaging cameras and energy saving kits to help residents increase their home's energy efficiency. Frome residents can access free retrofit surveys, where a local retrofit assessor creates a tailored plan for their home, suited to the individual's budget and needs.⁴



Explainer:

Retrofitting historic buildings

Retrofitting historic buildings, including buildings which are not Listed but may be in a [Conservation Area](#), has unique requirements. There is lots of useful guidance from [Historic England](#) to help communities with this topic, but it is important to be mindful of the need for listed building consent and/or planning permission when retrofitting historic buildings. Those living in particularly unusual historic buildings, even if they are post-war, have the most to gain from community action on retrofit, as they may find less commercial awareness of the issues.



Case study 2: Futureproof Cumbria, Cumbria

Futureproof Cumbria, previously known as Cumbria Action for Sustainability, works to build resilience, increase home energy efficiency, and reduce carbon emissions across the northern county. They provide a range of free home energy support with advice for residents on topics such as smart meters, ventilation, and heating.⁵ They share best practice on their YouTube channel, which features recordings of webinars on retrofitting and Solar PV, as well as hosting various events and training sessions on carbon literacy and climate change.⁶ The organisation also runs a Home Retrofit Service and Solar PV service to provide residents with easy access to more tailored specialist advice.

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Step 2: Establishing an area-based retrofit project

Britain has a wealth of historic housing types that are often highly regionalised – for example Leeds back-to-backs, London Warner flats, or Liverpool's interwar homes, alongside different materials and construction types across the country. One of the key opportunities for local communities is to develop locally tailored approaches to retrofitting particular types of housing, that can then be rolled out at lower cost and complexity to households across their area. Heating makes up on average 62% of the energy we use in our homes in Britain⁷, but government data shows that around half of all homes have no wall insulation at all⁸. Building shared best practice, whether at the scale of an individual street or neighbourhood, or across a wider area, benefits hugely from community input, and communities across the country are coming together to develop area based retrofit schemes in their patch.

Case study 3: Carbon Co-op's Levenshulme Area Based Retrofit Scheme, Manchester

Carbon Co-op, based in Manchester, specialises in energy services and advocacy. As part of the co-operative's work, they run several projects that explore the role of retrofit in achieving more energy-efficient buildings. Their recent project, the Levenshulme Area-Based Retrofit scheme, explores the opportunity for repeatability presented by terraced housing, by trialling a street-by-street approach to community retrofit.⁹ Residents of the street were offered a selection of retrofit methods, which were then tailored to the specific needs of each home. Retrofit measures being provided to residents include loft insulation, draft proofing and triple-glazed windows and doors for the rear of the properties. Carbon Co-op has taken a blended approach to funding this work, including a combination of contributions from homeowners, grant funding, and loan funding supported by Manchester City Council.¹⁰

Case study 4: Retrofit Balsall Heath, Birmingham

Retrofit Balsall Heath is a grassroots community organisation pioneering a community-led and neighbourhood-scale approach to retrofit. Balsall Heath is primarily made up of Victorian terrace housing that suffer from issues with cold and damp.¹¹ So far, the group have retrofitted 650 homes in the neighbourhood including through the installation of insulation, replacing windows and doors, air source heat pumps, and solar photovoltaic panels.¹² Retrofit Balsall Heath work extensively with a range of other local community groups to build awareness, as well as running a collaborative programme of community outreach to share their learning and advice on retrofit. This outreach includes door-knocking and hosting events such as their Retrofit Interfaith Iftar. Most recently, they hosted a Retrofit Spring Fayre that was attended by 250 people, encouraging attendees to get involved with DIY and planting.¹³

Explainer: Heat loss assessments

Before determining the best options for retrofit, community groups can jointly commission heat loss assessments. For individual buildings, this might involve thermal imaging, airtightness testing, and calculating U-values for different elements. At the neighbourhood scale, mapping heat loss can reveal patterns such as poorly insulated estates or shared roof structures, that make collective action more cost-effective. Digital tools like [Standard Assessment Procedure \(SAP\)](#) and the [Passive House Planning Package](#) help quantify improvements and guide design choices. Data-driven design ensures that any proposal will be able to reduce bills and make homes warmer, and is often required to be eligible for government funding.

Case study 5: Carlton Chapel House, North Camden Housing Co-op, London

Carlton Chapel House, located in Kentish Town, in North London is owned and operated by North Camden Housing Co-op. The block of 15 flats was built in 1983, and over time the building had degraded and was suffering from issues with damp and mould. After a feasibility study in 2011, the housing co-op moved forward with a redesign and deep retrofit of the building to future proof it for residents for decades to come. The co-op carried out the retrofit to meet the Passivhaus EnerPHit standard, and the property was fitted with external insulation, triple glazed windows, and heat recovery ventilation¹⁴. This was coupled with the removal of the building's gas supply and the installation of photovoltaic roof panels. Since the project's completion in 2019, residents have benefited from a 90% reduction in their heating and hot water bills.¹⁵

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Step 3: Retrofitting buildings to use more sustainable energy sources

Beyond upgrading the envelope of buildings to be more energy efficient, retrofit provides an opportunity to think creatively about our wider energy systems and sources and reduce dependence on fossil fuels through the use of district heating networks, solar panels and wind power. There are many different approaches to delivering these projects, often bringing together a range of funding sources. Increasingly, charitable and other specialist organisations and energy providers offer loan funding for sustainable energy projects for community groups, and [Community Energy England](#) publishes a list of such opportunities. Communities can play a huge role in bringing together local businesses and voluntary organisations to think about energy upgrades that do more than just benefit individual homes. Retrofitting non-residential buildings such as schools and community centres can raise awareness and educate people about both the benefits of retrofit, as well as changing energy needs such as those resulting from electric car charging points, which can also benefit from funding. Holistic thinking and community engagement can help to identify and develop opportunities for sustainable energy generation and micro-grids.

Case study 6: Haddenham Village Hall, Buckinghamshire

Haddenham is a village located near Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire. Haddenham Village Hall provides an event space for the village's residents, hosting community exercise classes and repair cafes. As the building was originally constructed in the 1960s, there was recognition from the Hall's Management Committee that the building needed retrofitting. As part of the committee's decarbonisation project, the building's gas heating system was replaced with a new air source heat pump.¹⁶ In addition to this, work was conducted on the hall's roof, including the installation of insulation as well as 48 solar panels and battery storage. The retrofitting work was funded by a combination of local fundraising, the Platinum Jubilee Village Halls Fund, and Section 106 money obtained with the assistance of Haddenham Parish Council.¹⁷

Case study 7: Owen Square Park Community Energy Project, Bristol

Located in the Easton neighbourhood of Bristol, Owen Square Park is the site of an innovative community run micro-grid, which provides energy to public and residential buildings in the surrounding area.¹⁸ In 2016, the CHOICES energy centre was installed in the park which includes a hybrid air/ground heat pump. In the summer months, surplus power from local solar PVs are used to power the air/ground heat pump.

The heat pump then charges the borehole thermal energy storage, which stores heat that is then transferred to heat surrounding buildings in the winter. Easton Community Centre is one of the key providers of solar energy for the microgrid, with over 150 solar panels installed on the building, and is one of the buildings heated by the micro-grid.¹⁹ The project is managed by Owen Square Community Energy co-op for the benefit of the community.

Explainer:

Low carbon heat networks

Some community retrofits go beyond individual heating systems, such as determining the feasibility of shared, low-carbon heat networks in an area. These distribute heat via insulated pipes, often from a central renewable source such as solar panels or heat pumps, to multiple buildings. When combined with building upgrades, heat networks can lower energy bills and reduce carbon emissions, especially in dense housing areas or areas where businesses, community buildings and homes can share connections.



Case study 8: Brighton Energy Co-op, East Sussex

Founded in 2010, Brighton Energy Co-op's work focuses on the provision of solar energy.²⁰ The co-op works as an approved contractor for Brighton and Hove City Council and through crowdfunding to provide free solar PV systems for local schools and buildings on the University of Brighton campus.²¹ For example, in 2019, over 900 solar panels were installed on a building at East Sussex College's Ore Valley Campus, and in 2021, 72% of the college's electricity needs were generated through the solar panels, providing a minimum saving of £4,000 on their energy bill per year.²² The co-op's work with schools goes beyond the installation of solar panels: they also run a range of educational workshops and assemblies on topics such as renewable energy, energy conservation, and the decarbonisation journey of schools.²³

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What communities can do

1

Work with other local community groups to deliver community outreach and education through events, workshops and door knocking, to build visibility, confidence and trust in retrofit measures.

2

Provide mutual and peer support, and act as a union for those interested in and undertaking retrofits already, banding together and mentoring to share information and best practice, stories and data. Support those with less experience and hard to reach groups in connecting with professionals.

3

Lead by example and demonstrate what's possible through retrofitting community buildings as living labs and learning sites, to embed skills and knowledge in communities.

4

Work with funders to develop blended funding approaches that work for local people, fostering open dialogue around costs and ensuring that retrofit projects respond to individuals and community interests and priorities.

5

Setup a community interest company or other body, where there is a need for a more formal structure, and should you wish to give detailed advice to homeowners or be involved in delivering retrofit services and solutions directly, or brokering their supply.

6

Campaign to demonstrate to people that retrofit is one of the most significant personal steps they can take to reduce their environmental impact and address climate change.

Why it matters

You can help your community to tackle the retrofit challenge, particularly where there are shared building types and opportunities for collective projects and community organising. The unique value that community organisations can bring to retrofit beyond bringing people together is that they can provide unbiased perspectives to homeowners in a way that businesses cannot. While professionals still have a role to play, there is so much that we can do if we work together to support building owners to make them more energy and heat efficient.



Further resources

Resource	Source
<u>Climate Emergency Retrofit Guide</u>	Good Homes Alliance
<u>Retrofitting and improving the energy efficiency of your home</u>	Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
<u>Community retrofit guide</u> , guidance on setting up for communities	Centre for Sustainable Energy
<u>Retrofit for the Future: a guide to making retrofit work</u>	Department for Energy Security and Net Zero
<u>Retrofit Internal Wall Insulation: Guide to best practice</u>	
<u>Climate Emergency Retrofit Guide</u>	London Energy Transformation
<u>Energy Efficiency and Your Home</u> , historic buildings guidance	Historic England
<u>Adapting Historic Buildings for Energy and Carbon Efficiency</u>	Historic England

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