

FINAL SUMMATIVE
ASSESSMENT
OF THE

**LOW
CARBON
DORSET
PROGRAMME**

March
2023



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FUTURES

Low Carbon Dorset is a £16.55m, six year programme, part funded through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). It was established to accelerate energy efficiency, renewable energy and other technologies and approaches to reduce carbon emissions across Dorset including Bournemouth Poole and Christchurch. It has provided free technical support and up to 40% grant funding to organisations in Dorset for energy efficiency and renewable energy projects. The Low Carbon Dorset (LCD) programme was originally scheduled to complete in early 2021 but received further ERDF funding to deliver through to mid-2023. An interim evaluation of the programme was undertaken in 2020 on Phase 1 of the programme. The final evaluation reports on both Phase 1 and 2 of the programme.

Positive change

Overall, the evaluation has found that the LCD programme has made significant progress towards its core objective. Demand for programme support has built over time, with a good pipeline of interested organisations continuing throughout the programme timescale. At the end of 2020 the project moved into a Phase Two of delivery, based on the pipeline of demand that existed at that time, particularly with regards to larger projects. This indicative demand has materialised, with the programme largely on target to spend its full budget. It has provided c£5.7m in direct ERDF grant support to organisations as at February 2023, to help them implement low carbon focused measures.

There has been strong demand from businesses and community organisations, for the technical advice and financial support provided through the programme. This has been enough to incentivise those organisations to invest their own funds to take their projects forward. Feedback has shown that the 'additionality' of the LCD programme has been high, with many of the organisations we received feedback from for this evaluation suggesting that they would not have undertaken the work if not supported through Low Carbon Dorset.

Direct consultations with many beneficiaries have shown that the programme is affecting positive on-the-ground change. Most organisations have reported reduced energy use which in turn will lead to GHG emission reductions. The significant increases in energy prices also provides important context. Many of the organisations that we spoke with cited the Low Carbon Dorset project as being highly important in withstanding some of the worst effects of the increased energy prices during 2022 onwards. Many felt they were more resilient as a consequence of the support.

Organisations have also cited the importance of using their low carbon credentials to heighten the awareness of others, particularly for those organisations who work directly in the community. Some organisations have been acting as advocates for the programme to others within their peers and networks, and the majority of organisations would recommend the LCD programme to others.

This final evaluation also sought to understand whether those energy savings that had been projected at the point of support – through the technical reports received by beneficiary organisations – had materialised as expected. The feedback from a sample of beneficiaries was that in many cases the technical performance had exceeded expectations. This particularly seemed to be the case for solar PVs.

There has been a good spread of projects across the whole Low Carbon Dorset programme area which covers the Dorset Council and the Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole local authority areas.

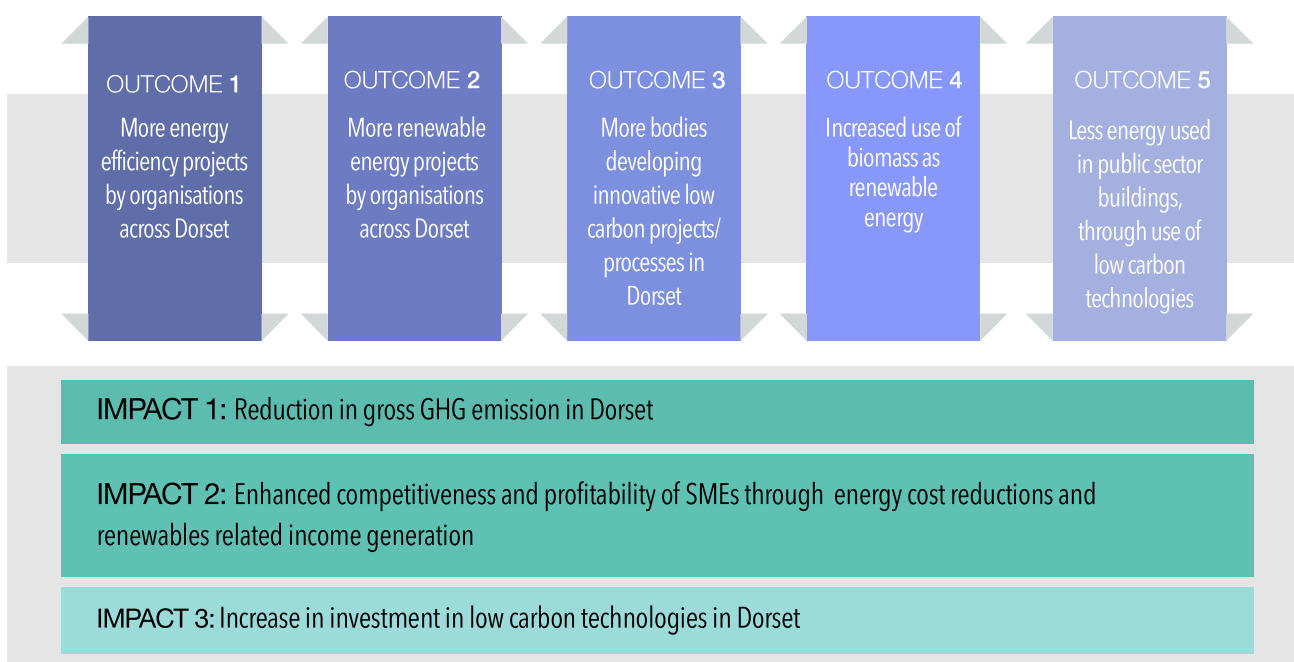
Strong team

The feedback received through this evaluation from both beneficiaries and wider stakeholders has been very positive about the support provided by the LCD programme team. It is viewed as a well-managed programme, diligently staffed by a small team of professionals. Its hands on support, provided to help beneficiaries apply for support, deliver their projects and claim any grant funding, has been highly valued. In particular, the impartial advice and guidance of the technical support officers has been widely welcomed.

The integration of a full time programme manager position in Phase 2 of the programme has been positive for programme leadership and delivery. Phase 1 of the programme delivered a number of smaller projects across its potential beneficiary groups – SMEs, community groups and public sector organisations. Phase 2 of the programme brought in a mix of some much larger and more complex projects, as well as maintaining and developing delivery of the smaller projects. It is to the credit of the LCD programme team, and particularly the programme manager, that it has achieved delivery of larger and more complex projects in the timescale. It is clear that LCD's proactive role, working with beneficiaries, has been vital to their project delivery.

Meeting outcomes and impacts

LCD set out outcomes and impacts that it wanted to flow from the programme's technical and grant support – as in the following diagram.



LCD has had good success in delivering against some of its outcomes and all of its impacts. However, there are two outcomes where the programme has struggled to achieve what was hoped . These relate to:

- 🌿 Reducing energy use within public buildings (Outcome 5).
- 🌿 Stimulating increased use of biomass as a source of renewable energy (Outcome 4)

Additionally, our view is that there is more that can be done in the remaining LCD timescale, to draw out and disseminate information and so progress one outcome further:

- 🌿 Supporting organisations to develop innovative low carbon projects or processes (Outcome 3)

Issues encountered have often been due to external factors outside the control of the programme. LCD has been vulnerable to a lot of technology and low carbon policy change over its lifetime. It is important to note that its delivery period also encompassed the Covid pandemic. Whilst much of this reinforces the reason for having the programme (the need to move to net zero has gathered momentum), it has also introduced new schemes and alternative funding opportunities. Most projects supported by LCD have tended to focus on 'standard/proven' technologies - which gives confidence to the beneficiary organisations that a payback against investment will be realised. Bringing forward more innovative activity is dependent on the risk appetite of the beneficiary organisations and especially so for public sector organisations (where the innovation aspect for projects coming to LCD for support was a mandatory requirement). Some other national funds introduced after LCD began, have been more attractive as they have no requirement for innovation and can provide 100% grant (certainly for the public sector through the Public Sector Decarbonisation scheme). Views/positions on some technologies have also changed, notably biomass. Making progress on some outcomes has been affected by this, which could not have been predicted when the programme was developed.






It is also important to highlight that the significant increase in energy costs that have occurred recently has meant that the 'payback period' for many of the Low Carbon Dorset projects has significantly reduced. Moving forward, a more flexible approach to public support (if there is overall funding available) may be more appropriate to consider (see below recommendation).

Robust processes

The appraisal and assessment process for projects seeking grant support through LCD is well structured and is relatively nimble when compared to other grant programmes. This is not at the cost of the appropriate due diligence and review needed. The LCD Programme Board and Grant Panel both served valuable purposes and both are important in the decision making process for approving grants. This is not to say there have been no issues – the evaluation has noted some. However, overall the processes in place seem to have operated effectively. Again, the proactive role of the LCD team in making sure this happened is important to recognise.

Recommendations

Our recommendations in this final evaluation relate to the opportunities in the remainder of the LCD programme, for creating legacy resources and for disseminating programme experience. Alongside this, we have made a couple of observations/recommendations beyond the ERDF funded period, although we do not know the future funding landscape. For the remainder of the programme, these include:

-  Legacy resources. Consider the potential for
 -  Some tailored guidance notes (building from the general guidance note already available through the website) which focus on specific topics that LCD has experience of e.g. energy efficiency and renewable energy in historic buildings; solar PV on factory roofs; opportunities for village halls;
 -  Developing a summary of any innovation that has emerged from projects – not just those labelled as innovative, but the large and small innovation elements that have been part of other projects. This could also provide valuable information and inspiration to others
 -  Developing some case studies further where information is emerging about practical measurable benefits. Our consultations have identified some where this could happen
 -  Making use of some of the advocates for low carbon action at project level, capturing their enthusiasm and benefits for their organisations in short videos

- Dissemination event. Consider the feasibility of holding such an event before the end of LCD and to which all project beneficiaries, Grant Panel members, Programme Board members and others could be invited, to hear from project beneficiaries, meet and make connections/network, and discuss dissemination plans and materials.

For beyond the ERDF funded programme:

- Continuation of technical advice and support. It is our understanding that support and advice through the technical officers will be continued through a Shared Prosperity Fund supported project for two years in the Dorset Council area– albeit at a smaller scale. This provides an opportunity to continue to explore longer term options whilst maintaining some technical support role in the shorter term and post ERDF support. The clear conclusion from this independent evaluation is how valuable that technical advice has been, and we would concur with the continuation of this support
- As discussed above, given the significant energy price increase, review whether public support (intervention) at the same level that LCD has provided is necessarily required to act as an incentive for organisations to invest in low carbon initiatives. If future funding did become available, then we would advocate a flexible approach to intervention - possibly at a lower level. However, we also recognise this depends on future energy prices, and how easy a 'flexible model' would be to implement.