Own Your SECAP

Sharing and expanding knowledge:
Towards Owning Your SECAP

Deliverable number	OwnYourSECAP D4.1
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Dissemination Level	Public (PU)
Date	Aug 2025
Status	Final

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1. Introduction

The OwnYourSECAP project allowed enhanced capacity building, collaboration and engagement with stakeholders from not just the target and replication municipalities but also helped in extending the reach of the project partners to several other local authorities. Currently, it is a strong network of more than 4000 stakeholders across the 11 partner countries. This has created valuable opportunities for knowledge exchange, collaboration, and mutual learning among project partners and local authorities across the 11 EU Member States involved.

This report compiles and showcases a collection of the most common challenges faced by the OwnYourSECAP project consortium across the 11 European partner countries, while employing the different approaches to owning the Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans (SECAPs) of the different municipalities they worked with and in the implementation of the different pillars of the project. The purpose of this report is to bring to light the current operational restrictions and functional environments in which different local authorities work, that impede in the process of owning their SECAPs through the perspectives and experiences of the project partners.

In addition to this, the report also offers potential solutions that could be implemented to gain certain targeted benefits across the municipalities. The challenges, solution and benefit demonstrated together, in this report, aims to depict the overall picture of the current scenarios of implementing climate actions in municipalities for a targeted audience - politicians, executives, and decision makers in local authorities and municipalities. The solutions and benefits aim to help the target audience draw inspiration from the lessons learned in implementation of SECAPs and bring positive changes to the current systems that can aid in achieving climate actions.

The report also presents examples and best practices of good administration and governance observed in some of the experienced and less experienced municipalities of the partner countries. It also depicts some profiles of environmental/climate action/ energy management staff members of these municipalities. Apart from the lessons learned in SECAP implementation, this document lastly presents the lessons learned through the implementation of various capacity building events under the themes of motivating and communicating, energy management, implementing actions, institutionalising climate adaptation and climate-mainstreaming municipal budgets.

The objectives of this report are as follows:

1. To identify the most common challenges experienced in the municipalities of the 11 different European partner countries in owning their SECAPs.
2. To provide insights into the potential solutions and benefits of tackling the above-mentioned challenges.
3. To document and demonstrate good governance examples of experienced and less experienced municipalities in the 11 partner countries to inspire, motivate and address political agenda.
4. To showcase the importance of owning the SECAPs.
5. To present the profiles of local authority staff members with their roles and responsibilities towards climate action.
6. To establish the lessons learned through the implementation of capacity building activities of the OwnYourSECAP project.

2. Common challenges in SECAP implementation

To identify the most common barriers in all the partner countries, the most optimum method was creating a sharable document. Each partner was asked to provide their inputs to list down as many challenges they could think of, that they experienced while carrying out the tasks and activities of the project, in municipalities while delivering climate action, in owning their SECAPs etc. A list of ten challenges was extracted, that stands for various organisational, financial, regulatory and external challenges as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: List of challenges in SECAP implementation identified by project partners, listed from most voted to the least

Challenges	Challenge categories
Lack or change of personnel resources in municipalities/ lack of internal capacity	Organisational
Implementation of climate-mainstreaming municipal budget guidelines/ cannot quantify the budget allocated to climate action	Financial / Budgetary
Lack of effective organisational structure/ interdepartmental coordination/ responsibility	Organisational
Financial constraint or limited budgets for climate and energy investments	Financial / Budgetary
Engaging local stakeholders to implement climate action	External engagement
Lack of motivation to set and achieve energy targets or to become climate leaders	Organisational
Lack of understanding of documents required/ different national climate plans	Organisational
Lack of effective monitoring	Organisational
Missing legislation/regulation	Regulatory
Lack of clarity in where to start	Organisational

The challenges described in Table 1, grouped into the four broader categories of organisational, financial/budgetary, regulatory and external engagement, were identified as most observed across the 11 partner countries. The ten challenges are further bundled into six challenges that align closely with one another. For example, lack of clarity, lack of understanding of documents and different national climate plans, lack of motivation and lack of effective monitoring has been clubbed into one challenge as they are closely associated.

The following sections provide a thorough description of these challenges in the format of problem – solution – benefit.

3. Organisational challenges

The most frequent issue raised by the project partners in the 11 European nations, was found to be in the category of organisational structure of the municipalities. Majority of the partners reported that some of the biggest barriers experienced in implementing SECAPs in municipalities were lack of organisational structure, lack of personnel resources, lack of motivation, lack of effective monitoring and lack of clarity in municipality personnels about documentations and various climate plans. These issues have been broadly discussed below under three challenge categories.

Challenge #1: Lack of internal capacity

Problem:

Across Europe, many local authorities, especially in smaller and rural municipalities, struggle with staff shortages, lack of expertise, and uneven distribution of roles focused on climate and energy action. While some councils have full teams of specialists, others lack key positions entirely, leading to significant disparities in progress. High staff turnover and difficulty retaining skilled workers worsen the issue, creating reluctance among municipal staff to engage in EU-funded projects. These projects are often seen as added burdens rather than support tools to help achieve climate goals.

Solution:

Some potential solutions to address this matter are as follows.

Solution #1: Establish a national framework

Creating a national framework or support mechanism will ensure all local authorities can access and retain core climate and energy staff. This could involve shared services between councils, national funding for key roles, and clear guidance on the minimum staffing needed to meet climate goals. Formation of regional climate action planning teams by pooling resources across different municipalities can potentially resolve the staff shortage crisis. It would also aid in skill sharing and build capacity. National or EU support hubs to address targeted questions from municipalities and provide technical assistance might encourage their participation in climate action.

A system of "Shared Energy Advisors" is in place in France. This is a person whose mission is to support communities in improving the energy performance of their assets. They may be employed by a community of communes, an energy union, and their services are offered to communities for a fee or for free, or they may be an agent of a community. Ademe (the national agency for ecological transition) subsidises part of this position for a limited period.

Solution #2: Awareness campaigns

Although projects such as OwnYourSECAP provide technical and advisory support on climate and energy management, planning and implementation, the psychological barrier of finding EU projects overwhelming can only be overcome by building awareness and information campaigns. Sharing success stories of municipalities that overcame staffing issues with project support might be useful. Use of intermediaries such as regional energy agencies and networks such as regional climate action units might help spread the right information and in capacity building. In Austria, a few such networks have been developed, with the goal of engaging the

local level in climate action and strengthening awareness and collaboration between municipalities. Examples for these initiatives are the Climate and Energy Model Regions, the e5 programme for energy-efficient municipalities, and the federal mission on climate-neutral cities, all of which attract many municipalities in Austria.

In Italy, there is a high level of fragmentation among municipalities and between municipalities and higher-level institutions (Energy Agencies, Regions, and networks of municipalities). Therefore, this barrier was addressed with ongoing staff training and support. The organization of monthly meetings with SECAP staff (as designated by the municipality) allowed for continuous and progressive skill development. During the OwnYourSECAP project, even the "less experienced" and "replicator" Italian municipalities (Pordenone, Roveredo in Piano, Cordenons, and Porcia) increased their level of expertise thanks to the continuous support provided by the national technical partner SOGESCA. The goal was to simultaneously increase the level of expertise and autonomy of the staff involved.

In France, several organizations are also carrying out such campaigns, particularly ADEME, the national agency for ecological transition. This agency notably coordinates the network of local authorities involved in the Territory Engaged in Ecological Transition initiative. As part of this initiative, it runs online workshops several times a month and regularly sends out newsletters for example.

Solution #3: Identifying Key Collaborators

Local authorities often lack in-house expertise, especially in smaller municipalities. By identifying and involving external experts, whether academic institutions, consultants, other energy agencies or NGOs, municipalities gain access to specialised knowledge and tools. One of the best practices was to collaborate with communication experts to deliver workshops on motivation and communication. Peer learning was supplemented by inputs from national and international stakeholders to share technical and practical insights (for example on energy management systems and climate budgeting strategies). This collaborative approach ensured that training quality was high and grounded in proven methodologies. The municipal officials who are responsible technicians/engineers for street lighting are often solely responsible, without any opportunity to internally exchange knowledge and experience. After a major increase in electricity prices at the end of 2022, the Swedish partner therefore created a network for these officials, where the key to knowledge and experience can be found as close as in the neighbouring municipality.

In the case of Spanish municipalities, the involvement of key stakeholders in the municipal SECAP team has helped in decision-making and the design of project pipelines for implementation each year.

Figure 1: Example of identifying M-CO as a key collaborator to deliver communication workshops in Ireland

Benefits:

- **Delivering quality climate and energy projects:** Clear guidance on minimum staffing requirements can help ensure all councils, regardless of size or location, can effectively drive climate and energy projects.

- **Consistency between national goals and local action:** This would promote consistency, accelerate progress towards national climate targets, and ensure equitable benefits from local climate action.

- **Effective climate decision-making:** Regional climate action units, like Ireland's Climate Action Regional Offices (CAROs) as shown in Figure 2, offer a cost-effective model for delivering expert guidance and support. This structure has significantly empowered Irish municipal staff with the tools and knowledge needed for effective climate decision-making.

- **Capacity building:** Such a unit can operate as shared-service networks across neighbouring counties, providing training, coordination, resources, and technical support to local authorities. Replicating such models across other EU countries could enhance access to specialist staff, technical guidance, templates, and mentorship for successful climate action planning and implementation.

Figure 2: Climate Action Regional Offices in Ireland

Challenge #2: Lack of effective organisational structure/ interdepartmental cooperation/ responsibility

Problem:

One of the most pressing barriers to successful SECAP implementation in municipalities is the lack of clear organisational structures and shared responsibility. Climate action requires coordinated decisions across sectors such as housing, transport, planning, and finance, yet in practice, these functions often operate in isolation. Without mechanisms that foster collaboration and accountability, municipalities struggle to integrate climate priorities into everyday governance, which undermines the effectiveness and timeliness of climate action.

Solution:

There is no recipe but there is more than one solution. Here are three most effective:

Solution #1: Establish a clear governance structure for climate action or revise the existing one

Create a dedicated climate coordination unit or appoint an officer within each municipality, mandated to oversee SECAP implementation. For example, in Ireland, all the counties have a mandatory Climate Action Team. This role/unit should be embedded at a high decision-making level (e.g., linked to the Mayor's office, executive director, deputy executive director or another high-level officer) to ensure authority and accountability. Formal mandates (e.g., municipal order etc.) help prevent diffusion of responsibility and guarantee that climate action is not seen as an "add-on," but as a strategic priority. This is the case in municipalities like Kuldīga and city

of Liepāja (Latvia) where executive directors are the appointed responsible officials, municipality of Tábor (Czech Republic) where energy manager has been appointed responsible for the SECAP. The assignment originated in other similar agendas concentrated in energy manager office, such as preparation and implementation of EU City Facility. In the Austrian municipality auf Baden, the head of the energy and climate department plays a key role in fostering intensive exchange with other municipal departments, the political sphere and external stakeholders in the field of climate action. Through his longstanding efforts, he has established himself as a nationwide pioneer in municipal climate protection in Austria. It takes frontrunner actors like him to advance climate protection at the local level.

In Italy, there are no national laws requiring municipalities with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants to develop Energy and/or Climate Plans. Therefore, working with small- to medium-sized municipalities, the internal structure of working groups in less-expert municipalities was designed during OwnYourSECAP. This process was facilitated by the development and certification of ISO 50001 Energy Management Systems. The positive experience of the Municipality of Abano Terme (expert) was successfully transferred to the Municipalities of Cordenons and Roveredo (less-experts). For the Municipality of Vicenza (expert), however, where a formal organizational framework already existed but was not fully operational, OwnYourSECAP contributed to the reactivation of roles with a clear distribution of responsibilities.

The case of Lorquí (Spain), is noteworthy. An internal multi-departmental group has been created as the main instrument for SECAP governance. This group includes various municipal departments, such as energy, environment, urban development, and finance, and is always chaired by the mayor or councillor delegated by the mayor. The group meets once a month to monitor projects and resolve any difficulties encountered in the implementation of the annual pipeline. In addition, the group is responsible for conducting an annual monitoring of SECAP, issuing reports that are submitted to the CoMO.

In France, local authorities with more than 20,000 inhabitants are required to develop a territorial climate, air, and energy plan within a relatively specific framework. Furthermore, local authorities are strongly encouraged by Ademe to follow the "Territoire Engagé en Transition Ecologique" (Engaged Territory in Ecological Transition) approach, which requires a clear governance structure to achieve the targeted goals. Implementing a management system such as ISO 50001 provides a clear structure for energy with key moments of sharing such as management reviews. The Rochefort Océan Urban Community (subject to the PCAET obligation and involved in the TETE program) has experimented with the ISO 50001 approach as part of the Own Your Secap project, describing specific roles and procedures beneficial to achieving objectives.

In Poland, some municipalities have developed dedicated structures to coordinate energy and climate actions. For example, in the Municipality of Bydgoszcz (expert), the Energy Management Team (ZZE) oversees SECAP implementation, monitors municipal energy consumption, manages heating and renewable energy systems, conducts greenhouse gas inventories, and coordinates national and international energy projects. This clear structure ensures interdepartmental cooperation, accountability, and effective integration of climate priorities into municipal governance.

Solution #2: Mainstream climate action across all departments

Introduce mechanisms that require each department (housing, transport, planning, finance, etc.) to take ownership of relevant SECAP actions. This can be achieved through departmental action plans (e.g., use OwnYourSECAP action plan template available [here](#)), joint KPIs like CO_2 emissions reduced, installed renewable capacities; nature-based solutions introduced in each sector, etc., or climate responsibility clauses in annual work programmes that demonstrate how their actions support SECAP implementation. By linking departmental performance to climate targets, municipalities can break silos and ensure climate considerations are integrated into everyday decision-making. This has been initiated through climate mainstreaming activities in municipalities like Ropaži (Latvia) and municipality of Jumilla (Spain).

Solution #3: Strengthen interdepartmental cooperation mechanisms

Set up regular cross-departmental working groups or taskforces dedicated to SECAP implementation. These groups should meet on a fixed schedule, exchange progress, and jointly resolve bottlenecks. Tools such as shared digital dashboards to track the progress of each action and involved party, joint budgeting for climate measures, and structured stakeholder engagement can further support collaboration and make progress more transparent across the organisation. If needed, a coach or communication expert can be involved at the beginning to facilitate cooperation and strengthen dialogue. Such groups are created in the city of Liepāja (Latvia), Voluntary association of municipalities Tolštejn (Czech Republic), municipality of Lorquí (Spain), municipality of Lorient (France).

Solution #4: Building Momentum

It is important for municipalities to take small steps, celebrate small and quick wins to build momentum to do something bigger. For example, for energy management, it was often identified as the first step towards reducing emissions because it is relatively straightforward and has immediate financial and environmental benefits. However, the cost of getting ISO 50001 certification in some cases overwhelmed municipalities, in some partner countries more than others. Therefore, introducing manageable and practical tasks such as identifying significant energy users, getting quotations for energy audits and later moving on to the auditing stage, helped municipalities demonstrate early success and secure internal buy-in.

Benefits:

Here are some common benefits for any of the proposed solutions:

- **Clearer accountability and ownership:** Defined roles and shared responsibilities ensure that climate action is not seen as the job of just one department but a collective municipal priority.

- **Confidence building:** Early wins build internal confidence and paved the way for broader SECAP implementation and policy shifts.

- **More efficient use of resources:** Coordinated governance and cross-departmental planning help avoid duplication, reduce bureaucratic delays, and make better use of budgets and staff capacity.

- **Faster and more effective SECAP implementation:** With streamlined structures and cooperation mechanisms, municipalities can deliver actions on time, meet funding requirements and KPIs, and achieve climate targets more quickly.

- **Increased innovation and adaptability:** Collaboration across departments sparks new solutions, integrates climate priorities into diverse policy areas, and strengthens municipalities' ability to adapt to emerging challenges.

- **Stronger political and public legitimacy:** Transparent structures (e.g., dashboards, cross-departmental groups) demonstrate progress and accountability, making it easier for politicians to show leadership and for citizens to trust the process.

Challenge #3: Lack of motivation / clarity/ effective monitoring

Despite the growing urgency of climate and energy goals set by EU directives, many local authorities struggle to translate these mandates into meaningful local action due to a range of systemic and operational barriers. While commitment in principle often exists, staff frequently face a lack of motivation, clarity, and capacity—driven by shortages in personnel and skills, inadequate organisational structures, limited accountability, and the overwhelming complexity of national and EU regulatory frameworks. This results in uncertainty about where to begin, how to progress, and a lack of accessible, actionable roadmaps tailored to local contexts, leading to inaction and missed opportunities. Compounding these challenges, the absence of effective monitoring systems critically undermines the implementation SECAPs, as municipalities are unable to measure progress, adapt strategies, or secure funding, ultimately weakening public trust, stakeholder engagement, and alignment with broader climate targets.

Solution:

A combination of the potential solutions offered corresponding to the previous challenges could be implemented to boost the morale of the municipality staff.

Solution #1: Empowering local authorities

Strengthening institutional capacity and resources, capacity building and training, enhancing organisational clarity and accountability, streamlining regulatory compliance and strategic planning could potentially bring clarity and motivate and empower local authorities' staff in delivering climate action.

A strong example comes from Latvia, where energy managers from various municipalities began meeting monthly—both online and in person—throughout the three years of the OwnYourSECAP project. These regular exchanges have evolved into a vibrant professional community that continues to collaborate daily, sharing knowledge and supporting each other, for instance when preparing reports for national institutions. This peer network has proven to be a powerful driver of motivation, mutual learning, and long-term institutional empowerment.

Solution #2: Identifying key topics

Tailoring training content to the specific needs of municipalities enhances the relevance and practical applicability of capacity building activities. Engaging local stakeholders early on ensures a demand-driven approach that leads of greater motivation and participation. One of the approaches that worked successfully was applying the design-thinking approach. Municipalities were surveyed or consulted to understand which climate mitigation and adaptation topics they found most pressing or challenging. This alignment helped maintain a high level of engagement during workshops and peer-to-peer sessions as public officers were more invested in discussions

that directly impacted their work. Workshops were designed to be interactive, with breakout rooms, collaborative documents, and follow-up discussions to maintain engagement and collect feedback.

Figure 2: Example of workshop on District Heating as a key topic identified in Ireland, key collaborator: CODEMA which is another prominent energy agency in Ireland

Solution #3: Motivating and communicating

Internal communication campaigns can also raise awareness and foster a shared sense of purpose through storytelling, workshops, internal newsletters etc. These campaigns can highlight success stories of other municipalities and communities making progress in meaningful climate action. It can also reflect the impact local authorities have in changing perspectives, educate, inspire and shift behaviour on a national scale.

Solution #4: Peer-to-peer learning

Both national and international P2P interactions were among the most effective tools for knowledge transfer in OwnYourSECAP project. Learning from peers facing similar institutional or resource constraints created a stronger sense of reliability and trust. The P2P events helped build confidence and community where participants feel less isolated and more empowered. Municipalities appreciated hearing both successes and failures as it helped them set realistic expectations. These P2P mechanisms should be embedded into ongoing national/regional municipal networks to sustain the impact post-project.

Figure 3: International P2P workshop in Prague in April 2024

Solution #5: Institutionalise monitoring in local governance

To strengthen monitoring practices, municipalities should assign clear roles and responsibilities within their departments to ensure accountability and continuity. Integrating SECAP monitoring into existing reporting cycles or performance management systems can streamline processes and align climate actions with broader municipal operations.

E.g., in Poland, the Municipality of Bydgoszcz has successfully institutionalised energy monitoring within its municipal structure. Facing difficulties in consolidating data from many public buildings, the city introduced an automated "robotisation of invoices" system to collect and analyse energy use and CO_2 emissions in real time. Integrated into the city's financial and reporting systems, this tool improved data accuracy, staff accountability, and the regular monitoring of SECAP progress.

Benefits:

These solutions can strengthen local capacities, bringing both immediate and long-term improvements to climate and energy governance.

- **Stronger teams:** Dedicated teams with clear mandates are better equipped to plan, implement, and monitor actions effectively.

- **Knowledge retention:** Institutionalise roles and structures help maintain momentum and continuity, even during staff turnover or political changes.

- **Greater efficiency:** Clear roles and responsibilities reduce duplication, gaps, and confusion improving coordination and use of resources.

- **Improved accountability:** Clearly defined roles ensure that monitoring tasks are consistently carried out.

- **Increased staff capacity:** Ongoing training and support make staff feel more competent, valued and less prone to burnout.

- **Streamlined processes:** Integration into existing reporting cycles reduces duplication and administrative burden.

- **Higher-quality data:** With an effective monitoring system put in place, more timely and comprehensive data collection and analysis is possible.

- **Clarity and focus:** Clear roadmaps and pathways help staff focus on realistic, actionable goals reducing overwhelm from broad directives.

- **Sense of solidarity and shared purpose:** P2P interactions help in inducing a sense of community and ownership.

4. Financial/ Budgetary challenges

One of the most frequently identified challenges among OwnYourSECAP project partners was the limited availability of dedicated climate budgets and financing for climate and energy projects. Municipalities, often managing extensive and diverse budgets across multiple departments, struggle to clearly identify and track the funds directed toward climate-related actions. As a result, investments in this area are easily overlooked or dispersed across different budget lines.

This fragmentation hindered the introduction and implementation of the climate-mainstreaming municipal budget guidelines in some countries, where financial transparency and coherence are key to successful integration. The following section outlines the key issues identified under this challenge, with further detailed analysis provided in the report *Climate-Mainstreaming Municipal Budgets: Lessons Learned.*

Challenge #4: Climate-mainstreaming municipal budgets and financial constraints

Problem:

Implementing climate and energy directives at the local level requires significant financial resources, but municipalities often struggle with fragmented budgets, competing departmental priorities, and a lack of coordination. Climate-related investments are frequently underreported or diluted within broader spending categories, making it difficult to track and scale effective action. Workshops under this theme reveal that local authorities face challenges integrating climate considerations into budgeting processes due to poor interdepartmental communication, inconsistent methods for evaluating climate-related spending, and perceptions of unfair blame among departments. This lack of a clear, collaborative budgeting framework ultimately undermines efforts to align municipal budgets with climate goals. This challenge is described in detail in the *Climate-mainstreaming in municipal budgets: Lessons Learned* report.

Solution:

Solution #1: Establish dedicated budget lines

One possible solution against the dilution of climate-related tasks within broader budget categories is establishing dedicated budget lines or funding streams within municipal financial plans that are explicitly allocated for climate and energy initiatives. Adopting a budget tagging system such as the guideline introduced in OwnYourSECAP project is a good start to try tracking and identifying climate and energy related expenditures.

Solution #2: Introduce a national guideline for climate-mainstreaming municipal budgets

To overcome the issues arising from the subjective nature of tagging a task as climate-friendly or unfriendly, introducing a national guideline will help all councils follow the same approach to climate-tagging their budgets—that is, identifying which projects support or hinder climate action. This guideline should include standardised definitions, sector-specific tagging criteria, a uniform methodology for evaluating climate relevance of budget items, etc. Each council should set up a cross-departmental working group to lead this work locally, making sure all voices are heard, and all relevant projects are included.

In France, under the Finance Act for 2024, local authorities with more than 3,500 inhabitants are required to produce an environmental appendix entitled 'impact of the budget for the ecological transition'. The Environmental Annex will be implemented gradually, by area and by type of expenditure, between 2025 and 2028. Guides are provided at the national level to assist in analysis. However, the guides are too heavy to be read by everyone in addition to their daily work and many questions arise when putting them into practice. As part of the OwnYourSECAP project, the city of Lorient tested the development of decision trees to facilitate application by everyone.

Solution #3: Inter-departmental working group

Setting up a cross-departmental working group to coordinate planning and budgeting for climate actions will help resolve the problem of identifying the right person to consult for budgets in other departments. Municipalities need to ensure that climate considerations are embedded into all aspects of urban and financial planning, including, capital investment plans, infrastructure development and procurement policies. Introduce regular, public reporting mechanisms on climate-related expenditures and outcomes to increase financial transparency and reporting.

Benefits:

There are several benefits that would be realised if the above solutions are implemented. Some of them are:

- **Greater visibility and accountability**: Dedicated climate budgets make climate-related investments easier to identify and track, improving transparency, simplifying reporting, and demonstrating tangible municipal commitment to climate action.

- **Smarter financial planning and decision-making:** Climate-tagging provides a clearer picture of total climate-related expenditures, helping decision-makers plan strategically, allocate resources efficiently, and justify future funding requests based on evidence.

- **Integrated and consistent climate action:** Mainstreaming climate considerations into all municipal budgets ensures that climate objectives are embedded in everyday governance, preventing them from being treated as separate or exceptional projects.

- **Improved national coherence and credibility:** National guidance adapted to each country's context promotes consistency and transparency across municipalities, strengthens data quality, builds public trust, and increases access to external funding opportunities.

- **Enhanced collaboration and leadership:** Cross-departmental coordination encourages shared responsibility for climate goals, improves communication between departments, ensures fair resource allocation, and reinforces strong local leadership in climate governance.

5. Limited stakeholder engagement and collaboration

SECAPs are the way through which local authorities enable the transition away from carbon-intensive energy, transport, buildings, infrastructure, food and ways of living. This essentially means that to implement SECAPs successfully, municipalities need collaboration of coordination with not just different departments within the council, but also with external stakeholders, who are key to delivering measurable climate mitigation and adaptation actions. However, it is often challenging for municipalities to bring on board different stakeholders to encourage their engagement in delivering climate actions. This section describes in detail the challenges faced by municipalities in stakeholder engagement for climate action.

Challenge #5: Stakeholder engagement for SECAP implementation

Problem:

Engaging external stakeholders such as businesses, civil society, academia, utilities, and regional or national institutions, in climate action and SECAP implementation at the municipal level is essential but fraught with challenges. Many stakeholders lack awareness or a clear understanding of the urgency of climate action or the purpose of SECAPs, often viewing climate responsibility as belonging solely to governments and perceiving the issue as distant, diffuse, and delayed. This can lead to confusion and a sense of helplessness, as stakeholders struggle to identify where or how to begin contributing. Compounding the challenge, many stakeholders—including businesses, utilities, developers, and some community groups—may have conflicting priorities driven by short-term financial interests, political goals, or sector-specific agendas that do not align with the long-term sustainability and resilience objectives of municipalities. Additionally, trust between municipalities and stakeholders is frequently low, with perceptions of unclear or unresponsive governance discouraging meaningful engagement. Civil society organisations may feel excluded, local expertise may go untapped, and top-down planning approaches often dominate. Furthermore, many stakeholders, particularly NGOs and small to medium enterprises, lack the time, budget, or resources to participate effectively, while municipalities themselves may not have the capacity to facilitate broad engagement. Ambiguity around roles, expectations, and the absence of clear frameworks for participation beyond mere consultation further hampers effective collaboration in the SECAP process.

Solution:

Solution #1: Building Credibility

Local Authorities leverage and influence through their services across various sectors. Firstly, it is crucial to identify key stakeholders, and understand their motivations, concerns and capacities. It is important to involve them early in the planning stages, not just during implementation. Municipalities should share data, plans and progress openly to build credibility and trust.

The Italian municipalities of the Pordenone Conurbation (Pordenone, Cordenons, Porcia, and Roveredo in Piano) initiated a shared process with local stakeholders from the very beginning of

the SECAP development. This conurbation, which developed a Joint SECAP, involved local stakeholders from various sectors: social housing, mobility, waste management, water supply network and purification plant management, landscaping designers, parking lot managers, the hospital's energy management, and local media. The activity initially involved gathering specific data and information from the stakeholders, and subsequently their participation in structuring the Joint SECAP actions. The success of the activity is due to the interest shown by the political representatives of the four municipalities involved and their willingness to follow the national partner's guidance regarding the importance of involving local stakeholders. This has contributed to raising the credibility of SECAP and sustainability policies in the area.

Solution #2: Selecting platform for communication and dissemination

Using the right platform ensures maximum reach, engagement and accessibility for participants. This is particularly important in contexts where remote or hybrid participation is required due to geographic constraints. Online platform such as Teams can be used for country-level workshops and breakout sessions in addition to in-person events. This increase accessibility and reduced travel-related barriers. Information about events and resources should be disseminated via multiple networks, such as the SEAI Energy Link website, which was used in Ireland.

Best practice includes creating events/ posters/ flyers etc. on the internal website and external website (if any). Information sharing in the form of visual graphics and designs (rather than facts and numbers) shared on social media such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram also help engage external stakeholders.

Solution #3: Climate communication is key

To achieve support from various stakeholders, climate communication is primary. There are several factors that need to be considered while designing a climate action campaign as shown in Figure 2. Using plain language and inclusive dialogue, transparent and iterative strategies is imperative to gain support from external stakeholders and enhance engagement and ownership of SECAP actions. Tailored content for various target audiences is central to craft compelling and relevant messages. It is important to connect to people's values and connect with trusted messengers. Leveraging valuable local knowledge and networks help build trust. To deal with the perception of climate impacts being distant, climate communication should bring climate home, highlighting visions and solutions. Using frames and narratives in a considered way by telling powerful stories, using effective images etc. are strong ways of bringing people on board.

People will act on issues that directly affect them	Incorporate climate content across different topics e.g. health, sport, transport	The best approach varies by target audience	Use segmentations to target content by topic and channel
Factual information is not effective on its own	Make content relatable, tell impactful stories	Different behaviours have different barriers and motivators	Consider areas such as energy, transport and food separately
No one campaign achieves all your aims	Take a long-term, consistent approach to comms & engagement	Individuals can't do everything on their own	Focus on change at the system level

Figure 4: Factors to be considered in a climate communication campaign to engage stakeholders (Source: M-CO)

To strengthen the communication skills of energy managers and municipal employees, several targeted workshops were organised in Latvia. A professional communication coach facilitated these sessions, helping participants enhance their ability to communicate effectively—particularly on topics such as energy and climate, which are often perceived as technical or lower-priority issues.

Solution #4: Collaboration and public participation

Facilitating horizontal collaboration through peer networks, participatory planning and co-creation platforms would help to overcome rigid hierarchy that impedes flexible planning and build support not just internally in municipalities across departments, but also with external stakeholders. Integrated planning and participatory dialogue that includes stakeholder interests at the outset would also aid in garnering support from key actors.

The municipality of Langenzersdorf in Austria organized a public workshop in the context of OwnYourSECAP, inviting all citizens to develop a joint vision for a desirable Langenezrsdorf in the year 2040. This workshop with more than 50 participants showed the local population's keen interest in the future-proof local development and sustainable orientation of the municipality.

The Municipality of Caldogno (replicator) in Italy organized a thematic workshop dedicated to the energy and climate objectives of its building regulations. Over 30 stakeholders from the residential sector (designers, engineers, architects, builders, surveyors, etc.) actively participated in developing a building practice monitoring tool. The goal was to provide the Municipality and stakeholders with a tool capable of monitoring potential energy savings and/or increased resilience to climate change resulting from building renovations in the area. This shared workshop allowed citizens, businesses, and the Municipality to gain insight into the evolution of the urban area resulting from the implementation of the municipal regulations on the private building sector.

Solution #5: Co-benefits demonstration

Sufficient demonstration of the economic benefits of SECAP implementation such as energy savings, climate risk reduction, climate-resilient agriculture etc. is crucial in successfully

collaborating with businesses. Providing co-funding, recognition, or technical support for stakeholder-led initiatives are good incentives for stakeholder participation. Developing public-private partnership models for implementing specific SECAP actions would be beneficial.

Benefits:

While stakeholder engagement for climate action is often difficult due to differing priorities, limited resources, and fragmented approaches, proactive, inclusive, and strategic engagement processes can overcome these barriers. Municipalities that invest in genuine collaboration will be better equipped to implement SECAPs effectively and build resilient, climate-smart communities.

The following provides a comprehensive list of benefits that could be observed in municipalities if the potential solutions described above are adopted.

- **Improved Plan Quality:** Local knowledge enhances the relevance and feasibility of SECAP actions

- **Shared SECAP Ownership:** Stakeholders are more likely to support and implement actions they helped design.

- **Leveraging resources:** Mobilise additional funding, local knowledge and capacity

- **Greater innovation:** Diverse perspectives can lead to more creative solutions.

- **Stronger community support:** Transparent and participatory processes increase legitimacy and buy-in.

- **Accelerated implementation:** Engaged partners can help implement and monitor SECAP actions faster.

6. Regulatory challenges

Broadly, many municipalities across Europe face incoherent governance environments, where national, regional, and local climate priorities don't align, differing legislative incentives exist, and administrative processes are cumbersome. These mismatches slow or dilute SECAP action. This section elaborates on the various challenges faced under regulatory and legislative sectors that hinder the implementation of SECAPs.

Challenge #6: Missing/ inconsistent legislations & regulations

Problem:

Across Europe, municipalities often operate within fragmented and incoherent governance structures that hinder their ability to effectively implement SECAPs. A major obstacle lies in the misalignment of climate and energy priorities across national, regional, and local levels of government; while municipalities may be eager to take ambitious climate action, their efforts are frequently constrained by national policies lacking support mechanisms or by conflicting regional objectives. This governance disconnect is compounded by legislative inconsistencies, such as contradictory regulations on land use, energy generation, or emissions standards, making coherent strategy development difficult. Financial and regulatory incentives are often misaligned or favour short-term economic goals over long-term climate resilience. Moreover, the absence of dedicated legislation at national or regional levels often leaves municipalities without the legal tools, mandates, or institutional support needed to implement SECAPs effectively. Although initiatives like the Covenant of Mayors provide a roadmap for local climate action, their impact is limited without enabling legal frameworks that formally recognize and integrate SECAPs into broader strategies.

Solutions:

It is important to recognise that introducing news legislative frameworks and addressing missing or inconsistent regulations is a complex and time taking process. Nonetheless, some potential solutions are offered below:

Solution #1: Mandating SECAPs

Stronger legislative frameworks are needed at the national and regional levels. In countries with missing legislations, these should formally recognize SECAPs as strategic planning instruments, mandate their development where appropriate, and provide clear guidelines, funding mechanisms, and institutional support for their implementation. Without such enabling legislation, many municipalities will remain under-equipped to drive the local climate transition, limiting the EU's overall ability to achieve its climate neutrality goals.

In Portugal, the Climate Framework Law (Law No. 98/2021, of 31 December) mandated that all municipalities approve a Municipal Climate Action Plan (PMAC) within 24 months of its enactment. This national legal framework strengthened the alignment between European, national, and local climate and energy policies, directly linking municipal actions to the National Energy and Climate Plan 2030 (NECP 2030) and the Carbon Neutrality Roadmap 2050 (RNC 2050).

This obligation coincided with the implementation of the OwnYourSECAP project, which provided essential methodological and technical support to municipalities in translating EU-level SECAP structures into the new national PMAC framework. Several Portuguese municipalities, including Coimbra, Figueira da Foz, Guimarães, and Cascais, chose to merge both plans into a single strategic document, combining the energy-focused aspects of SECAPs (energy efficiency and energy poverty) with the broader climate governance dimension of PMACs.

The municipality of Figueira da Foz was the first in Portugal to adapt its voluntary SECAP to the mandatory PMAC format, utilising the tools, templates, and peer-learning guidance developed within the OwnYourSECAP project. This process ensured coherence between EU and national requirements, fostered consistency in targets and monitoring indicators, and set a precedent later adopted by other Portuguese municipalities.

The Portuguese example demonstrates how EU projects can accelerate the practical implementation of national climate legislation by offering technical expertise, participatory methods, and alignment with international standards such as the Covenant of Mayors framework.

Solution #2: Country-level assessments

Focused country assessments are needed especially for those with national-only laws and National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) lacking local support to confirm whether legal frameworks actively facilitate SECAP development and implementation. These assessments should identify gaps in enabling conditions, whether it is legal, financial, technical, institutional etc., that might hinder the development and owning of SECAPs. This is essential to analyse the legal and institutional landscape of each country to determine whether the legal and policy frameworks support, rather than merely permit climate action at the local level.

Solution #3: Strengthening legislations

To strengthen legislation where absent, national governments could:

- Embed municipal climate planning in climate law.
- Provide mandates for local emission inventories, action plans, and reporting systems.
- Establish technical and financial support channels for local authorities.
- Enable multilevel dialogue platforms to align national and SECAP ambitions.

Benefits:

If the proposed solutions are effectively implemented, they can bring a wide range of **benefits** across governance, environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Some of these benefits are described below:

- **Bridges implementation gaps and strengthens planning:** Country-based analyses help identify practical challenges and opportunities, leading to more effective development and implementation of SECAPs.

- **Empowers municipalities through stronger governance frameworks:** Robust legislation and the legal embedding of climate responsibilities enable targeted local action, ensure continuity beyond political cycles, and accelerate climate progress.

- **Enhances policy coherence across governance levels:** Multilevel dialogue fosters alignment between national and local objectives, supports consistent implementation, and creates valuable feedback loops where local innovation informs national policy.

- **Expands access to funding and investment opportunities:** Formalised SECAPs open the door to EU and international climate finance, attract private sector engagement, and incentivise proactive municipal action.

- **Delivers social, economic, and cooperative benefits:** Climate planning increases public participation, strengthens community trust, promotes green jobs, boosts local economies, and encourages peer learning and collaboration among municipalities.