

Community Energy Workshop: Outcomes & Actions

1 INTRODUCTION

The potential role for community level energy initiatives, to contribute and engage with the broader aims of energy security and climate change strategy in the UK, has become increasingly recognized in recent times and was again highlighted in the recent Government led community energy 'call for evidence' which took place during the summer.

Clearly, decision-making and implementation in this area are undergoing a gradual shift away from 'top down' policy towards a wider governance approach characterized by complex networks, influences and exchanges between a variety of actors and institutions operating at national, international and local levels. However, whether the UK Governments interest is genuine or whether it is merely paying lip service to both the importance and the possibilities for a more grassroots approach to governing energy and environmental issues remains to be seen.

What would seem to be apparent however is that the proliferation of community led energy initiatives that have emerged in the UK during the last two decades, seem to offer hope of an alternative vision, through which to address some of the gaps in current top-down policy endeavours and governing approaches around energy in the UK.

The 30th October workshop at the Environmental Sustainability Institute, University of Exeter, was put together with the aim of bringing together representatives of the 16 groups known to be working in Cornwall, alongside a range of academics, local government representatives, and other interested parties. The aim was to network, share knowledge, and to think about how the University might contribute to a more joined-up agenda for community energy in Cornwall. The University has worked with a number of these organisations in the past and it was felt that such an event would:

- Provide an opportunity to reinvigorate and strengthen links with existing community energy networks;
- To scope out current barriers, challenges and opportunities facing the various groups who are currently engaged with community energy projects in Cornwall;

- To encourage the development of new ideas, ways of working, and ascertain how current progress might be consolidated and developed in relation to future ways of working.

The day was a great success with over eighty people taking part in the various presentations, discussions and forums. Fifty of the participants are currently engaged at various levels with community energy initiatives in Cornwall. Amongst the topics discussed during the day were: ‘

- Joined up thinking between Government policy, Cornwall Council and community renewables;
- The economic, social and political benefits to developing local energy markets;
- Delivery mechanisms and investment readiness;
- Importance of trans-disciplinary thinking;
- The importance of engaging with people, places and issues;
- Practical discussions with community groups, sharing knowledge and experience of establishing and developing community renewable schemes.

The last session revisited the issues in order to clarify what participants thought were the most salient issues to emerge during the day, and whether these issues might form a basis for discussion at future workshops.

In developing this document we have aimed to collate the feedback and learning from the day and form a strategic response to it with definitive actions, aims and measurable outcomes.

2 HEADLINES

- Community groups have not traditionally been major players in regard to energy but the situation has been changing over the last two decades;
- For some this is now becoming a coherent agenda, for others it is more of a piecemeal, issue based approach;
- Legacy of centralization around decision making in energy means that there are power imbalances i.e. in relation to finance, capital and purchasing power; influence over supply chains; laws around planning, buildings and infrastructure;
- Lack of alignment between Central Government rhetoric on localism and current policy reality means that there may be an unrealistic expectation around the current capacities of community energy organizations to carry the agenda from this level;

- There is variable expertise within community energy organizations and this relates to their working model i.e. their position as social enterprises, charities, voluntary groups and co-operatives;
- Whilst some have been able to develop the necessary degree of cohesion to develop longer term consolidation and influence, others have had difficulties in keeping momentum going;
- The diversity of community energy groups also relates to a variety of aims and objectives. Some have developed around reducing energy demand, issues such as fuel poverty, technology and installed capacity, while others have incorporated a range of different pathways;
- Partnership working (highlighted by the UK Government as crucial to effective local mobilization) is often variable, resource intensive and requires long term input from willing partners;
- The problem of divisiveness and developing a shared vision with many community members and remains a persistent challenge for community energy groups in relation to reaching into the wider community;
- There are a number of NIMBY groups in Cornwall who tend to influence negative press around some of the benefits of community energy;
- NIMBYISM is an important aspect of listening to other voices – unless you reach these people you will never get any lasting change.

3 POLICY, FINANCE, PLANNING, LOCAL ENERGY MARKETS

One of the main issues raised during the day was the criticism that a lot of community work was not being supported by Central Government – despite political rhetoric which suggested otherwise. The point was made by many of the participants that the discussions at national level frame the decision making process at the local level, so it is important to develop alignment between the two. Even the more successful community energy groups will only develop to a certain level before they come up against national level aims and objectives. This is a finding which is supported by research which has been undertaken in the field i.e. Hoffman *et al* (2013), Peters *et al* (2010), much of which highlights the important role of top-level financial and political support in leveraging the success, or otherwise, of initiatives which are developed at community and local level.

Indeed it was felt by some participants that community level energy projects are perceived as marginal by Central Government, when in fact they should be viewed as a realistic way of achieving some of the more intractable goals around sustainability.

It was felt by some that the difficulties of getting projects off the ground at this level are largely due to the ways in which community energy remains structured financially. Some saw this as evidenced by the extent to which projects (particularly those around the development of installed capacity) need to involve a large amount of input from consultants, lawyers etc. Certainly it was pointed out that groups looking to develop renewable energy projects needed to be 'investment ready' i.e. in relation to having developed a sound business plan.

The majority of participants felt that local knowledge of what communities themselves need and might contribute in terms of energy continues to be overlooked at the national level, to a large extent in favour of scale-oriented, supply side solutions. It was argued that there remains a political preference for the big six energy companies to supply and deliver energy, as opposed to more decentralized alternatives which might be delivered at the local level by communities.

It was pointed out that the governance of energy at the local level has yet to be engaged into a workable, joined up system which:

- Addresses power structures at local government level;
- Establishes a clearly defined decision-making process;
- And clarifies the ways in which organisations relate to the wider political agenda i.e. dispersed powers between different stakeholders such as parish councils, transition groups, and local government.

Changes in planning, and the regulatory frameworks around planning, have begun to take on increasing importance as potential levers which will help to enable the shift to a more bottom-up response to energy and climate issues in the UK. It is apparent that both design and future strategies around housing infrastructure, transport and mobility, and the possibilities for new and innovative technologies to be developed at community levels, are only likely take place with changes to the existing planning system. However, this shift in perspective has raised numerous questions in relation to both the role and influence of communities in a process in which they previously had very little control. For instance, whilst there have been changes made in planning over the last decade community energy still remains largely at the periphery within the UK energy infrastructure.

It was suggested that the role of Central Government is important in this area as there needs to be an overarching policy framework to enable policy horizons which can be set out more strategically at the local level. This would be useful for instance in mapping out grid connections where there might be pockets of easy connectivity for renewable energy projects. It was felt that the development of more local energy markets would necessarily involve local leadership in changing the grid from its current centralized structure.

It was pointed out that a good starting point for these problems would be to integrate more of a 'neighbouring planning' approach whereby there would be much more local control around decision making and 'what works best'. It was felt that this would be a good way in which to 'rouse a local challenge around energy'. It was suggested that, at the moment, current planning laws mean that there is a disjuncture between what many community energy groups would *like* to happen and the enabling mechanisms which are currently in place.

It was pointed out that a more mainstream community energy programme, characterized by a more decentralized, local system of production and consumption in Cornwall could potentially constitute a 'third industrial revolution'. It was suggested that this would potentially mean the development of communities shaped much more through greater social, economic, employment and environmental benefits as well as greater energy security.

It was pointed out for example that the current aim of the Green Cornwall programme is to try to encourage the development of local energy markets, linking generation and local supply near to point of use. Potential benefits would be locally produced energy – being sold to local homes and businesses – and also benefits to consumers in terms of cost. It was felt by many participants that 'benefits to consumers' are an important selling point as the majority of people ultimately frame their energy use in terms of cost. It was suggested that the consolidation of such a programme will ultimately require greater local leadership in setting in motion the change to convert the grid from its present centralized structure, and also to change the influence of current power relationships and incumbents. In this way, it was felt that the communities in Cornwall themselves might then capitalize on a market-based approach to energy but in such a way as would visibly benefit its inhabitants – particularly in terms of cost, energy efficiency, fuel poverty, local employment, and environmental benefits.

It was felt by some participants that the 'short termism' around Central Government thinking was particularly pertinent in respect to the emergence of this kind of decision making at the local level – both in terms of local authority influence and community decision making. It was suggested that it was difficult to develop a longer term vision at community level where current planning laws remain a huge constraint on doing things more creatively.

The Cornwall Community Energy Forum

To address these issues effectively and enable communities to take advantage of the opportunities available to them, the development of a streamlined and focused structure for renewables in Cornwall is essential. An effective structure would potentially enable divergent opinions and approaches to come together to create a more unified and cohesive approach to energy. The Energy Forum will be a central part of moving the debate forward in a way which will help to create actual change, provide support to communities, organisations and politicians, and

cut bureaucracy in order to create a clear direction for currently diverse opinions, approaches and methodologies.

The Energy Forum will be an open forum for individuals and organisations with an interest and experience in energy, specifically community energy, mass engagement, planning and development, finance, technology, local government, research and development, and academia.

Led by the Environment and Sustainability Institute (ESI) and core partners, and steered by the Committee on Energy in Cornwall (CEC), the forum will facilitate an ongoing conversation between a wide range of stakeholders in Cornwall. The outputs will contribute to the evidence base used by the CEC to develop a long term strategic approach to energy in Cornwall.

The forum will initially be delivered through an overarching programme of energy workshops, building on the first community energy event held in October 2013, and will be run by the ESI and core partners.

The aims and objectives of the Energy Forum will be to:

- Engage a wide range of organisations and individuals to share experience, evidence and analysis, and encourage momentum to Cornwall's community energy endeavors;
- Develop best practice guidelines;
- Explore and focus the often divergent priorities and interests of partners;
- Contribute to the development of, and promote, a Digital Resource Hub;
- Respond to requests for evidence / outputs requested by the CEC.

The Committee on Energy in Cornwall (CEC) will be an independent interdisciplinary committee drawn from community energy groups, local and national government, academia, industry, non-government organisations, and other energy experts.

The CEC will sit above, and cut across, all partners to provide one informed voice to guide Cornwall's energy future, independent of political timescales and drivers.

The Committee will:

- Develop and communicate a long term strategic approach to energy in Cornwall;
- Provide robust leadership to enable the delivery of Cornwall's energy economy e.g. through planning and development, finance, communication;
- Engage, at a high level and with a strong voice of consensus, with government, media and industry;
- Influence national energy policy and decision making;
- Promote Cornwall as a test bed for new environmental policies and incentives;
- Encourage inward investment into Cornwall;

- Produce an annual report on the development of Cornwall's energy economy, and the role of energy efficiency, smart and renewable energy, including carbon targets, energy diversity, security and economic markers;
- Conduct independent analysis of progress against energy objectives;
- Oversee, review and direct the work of the Energy Forum.

3 COMMUNICATIONS

One of the main issues that emerged during the initial workshop was a sense that barriers to the kind of thinking on what is possible in Cornwall in relation to energy is often reflected in the communities themselves, where the role of opposition groups often influences inertia rather than 'progressive', locally led solutions. It was argued that better communication was needed around what the priorities should be locally, what the benefits of change would be, and what mechanisms could be used to get communities involved. It was suggested that setting up 'local education forums', where competing views could be articulated, might be a start in reconciling different interests within communities themselves. It was pointed out that perceptions, stereotypes and media misinformation are sometimes changed in discussion and two-way communication.

The CEC will take responsibility for developing an overarching Communications and Engagement Strategy and Action Plan (CESAP) aimed at aligning diverse messages and creating a strong, unified and positive voice around energy in Cornwall.

CESAP will deliver a set of cohesive messages to all stakeholders to promote and strengthen the work of both the CEC and the EF. The CESAP will be designed with partners and owned primarily by energysure.

The CESAP will incorporate a brand book and digital assets to facilitate strong messaging. energysure will work with partners to ensure alignment and maximisation of comms contacts and resources.

The CESAP will:

- Communicate the benefits of proactive energy engagement more clearly;
- Encourage better quality and increasing numbers of applications for renewable energy and smart energy initiatives, and take up of energy efficiency measures;
- Ensure a more receptive audience at local and national government level, within local communities and planning departments;

- Develop a stronger voice within the energy and technology industries to encourage greater inward investment into Cornwall.

Core messages will be developed and disseminated in a variety of ways to different audiences – people, businesses, government and communities. The core messages and the way in which they are communicated will:

- Demonstrate best practice for effective engagement and strengthen relationships between communities, government and industry;
- Align partner communications, engagement practices and resources where possible;
- Improve the quality, consistency and range of local communications and engagement messages;
- Be long term and adaptable to change.

Other information likely to be disseminated includes:

- Policy updates from national government e.g. the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) and the Committee on Climate Change (CCC);
- Research into best practice from around the world in mass engagement and motivational consumer behavior;
- Research into the psychology of mass engagement;
- ‘On the ground’ experience from those working in energy engagement.

A Digital Resource Hub will be established to provide on the ground practical support to all partners. This will be an open data digital resource to enable local people, communities, industry, academia and government to capitalise on Cornwall's energy economy opportunities.

The resource hub will provide free access to:

- All CEC communications and outputs;
- Guidance and information on best practice e.g. local energy initiatives, communications, planning, finance mechanisms;
- Practical toolkits and templates;
- A local energy social network;
- Case studies e.g. videos, diaries;
- Strategies and policies from a wide range of energy related disciplines and industries;
- Research and development outputs;
- FAQ's and contacts.

4 NEXT STEPS

- energys**share** will collate comments on the draft Community Energy Action Plan;
- A final version will be circulated in early 2014;
- A 'kick off' meeting to be held with representatives from key partners;
- Key roles and responsibilities agreed;
- Start work!