



## Headlines from Think Tank

### **Community Energy**

Held at Trafford Hall on 17<sup>th</sup>- 18<sup>th</sup> January 2017

1. Community energy is a **growing sector** that involves lots of supporting organisations and groups of like-minded individuals and communities. To date, there are hundreds of **successful and inspiring examples** of community energy projects around the UK. **Sharing lessons and learning** from other people's experiences helps avoid costly mistakes and reinventing the wheel.
2. Community energy is about **local energy solutions** to a major international problem. There is a strong case for community energy, not only to reduce our carbon footprint but also to tackle **fuel poverty** and reduce the impact of cold homes on **health and wellbeing**. Small-scale, locally distributed energy is already making a major contribution to a more **sustainable future**. This requires a new transmission and distribution system if it to continue to grow.
3. Community energy typically means **energy production** from renewable sources, such as water, sun, biomass, and wind, and **energy saving** to reduce people's energy demand. These two elements are **complementary**, as reducing demand for energy makes renewables more viable. It also increases the share of total energy renewables can produce.
4. Community energy projects require **vision**, commitment, **time**, teamwork, stamina and **perseverance** to overcome difficulties and hurdles. It is a **technically complex** and organisationally **challenging** process, which requires a lot of advice and support from technical experts. One of the biggest challenges for community energy is **bridging the gap** between technical experts and non-technical people.
5. The **buy-in of the community** which is going to benefit from a community energy project is crucial, especially if the community energy project relies on **community shares** for financing. If there are **trusted** members of the community behind the project, then it is easier to get others on board.
6. It can be **difficult to get people interested** in energy saving. Carbon reduction, although widely accepted as necessary, often seems less urgent than more immediate concerns. But most people do care about **saving money on energy bills**, improving their homes and living in a healthy, warm environment. **Apps and online learning tools** can be useful. It is possible to build energy advice into virtually every community project, e.g. cookery.

7. **Building local partnerships** with local organisations underpin successful community energy projects. Community buildings such as schools, halls and churches can showcase the potential benefits of community energy projects to the wider community.
8. **Social landlords** can act as **catalysts, funders and enablers** of community energy projects. They can provide training, facilities, funding and support. They can also **apply energy efficiency measures** at scale to their stock to reduce energy demand. In this way they educate tenants and staff. Solar PV is now so much cheaper that it can be worthwhile to invest where buildings are suitable.
9. **Storage of energy** is a key infrastructural problem in community energy. Energy production through renewables is subject to peaks and downturns throughout the day, which do not necessarily match households' energy use. Storing and distributing renewable energy through batteries can provide viable alternative to the national grid. The price of batteries is gradually falling and storage improving.
10. **Volunteers** are at the heart of community energy projects. They are the visionaries behind the project and the **community energy champions** giving home energy advice. Recruiting and retaining volunteers is as important for the very existence of community energy projects, as it is for any other community enterprise venture. Training for community energy is a **skill building exercise** for local people and can help improve their job prospects.
11. Often **start-up funding** is required to get projects off the ground. There are pots of funding available from the government but they are sometimes **difficult for small groups to access** as local authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships (in England) administer them locally, leading to a 'postcode lottery' depending on local priorities and pressures.
12. **Frequent policy flip-flops** are not helping the sector. Upfront investment requires a stable financial and policy framework. The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015 in Wales is a good example of strong policy leadership on sustainability. The introduction of a robust regulatory framework for the Private Rented Sector can also help improve energy efficiency standards. Energy is not firmly rooted in BEIS/DECC, but community energy no longer has its own support unit or funding, so it is less conspicuous.
13. Community energy projects are spreading in spite of these barriers. We are on the brink of generating and distributing more energy locally than nationally. This will **force the pace of change** in the national grid and distribution companies so that they are more prepared for distributed energy.
14. There are many '**hidden gems**' in the community energy field. We will add them to our collection of Housing Plus case studies.