



Community Energy  
– Stakeholder Event

# **SUMMARY REPORT**

Parliament Buildings, Stormont  
**18th February 2014**





## About the Event

On 18th February 2014, The Fermanagh Trust hosted an event on communities and energy with the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment at Parliament Buildings, Stormont. The event aimed to highlight the issue of community energy and the issue of community benefits from wind farm developments.

A wide range of stakeholders attended the event. This included the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, MLAs, government officials, the private sector, and representatives from the community and voluntary sector. This report provides a summary of the main issues discussed and important next steps identified by the key note speakers.

## Background

There has been an increased focus on the need to strengthen how communities interact and engage with energy. This has included much debate around the scale and nature of renewable energy development in Northern Ireland.

Indeed the Northern Ireland Executive has a target of achieving 40% of electricity consumption from renewable sources by 2020, with onshore wind energy making a large contribution to this. However this has significant implications for host communities and areas such as the rural west have experienced high levels of large scale wind energy development. There is therefore a need to ensure that communities are thoroughly engaged with as part of this development.

An area which is also receiving increased focus is the development of community energy. Community energy is witnessing significant growth, with a range of stakeholders taking action to address this issue. An example of such, is the approach taken by the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) which launched the Community Energy Strategy on the 27th January 2014. The Strategy has identified a number of key issues facing community energy and has set out actions to address them. The issues include the role of partnerships; community capability and capacity; and evaluation and measuring impact. The NI Executive has been fully engaged in its development, and moving forward DETI has stated its view to formulate and consult on a draft action plan to support communities and renewable energy in Northern Ireland.

It is therefore a timely and important opportunity to discuss these issues.





## Welcome and Introductions

**Patsy McGlone MLA, Chairperson, Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment**

Mr McGlone opened proceedings by stressing the importance of strengthening how communities interact and engage with energy, particularly against the backdrop of high levels of renewable energy deployment across Northern Ireland.



## Community Energy - Background and Opportunities

**Lauri McCusker, Director of The Fermanagh Trust**

*The Fermanagh Trust is an independent community based foundation which supports local communities and groups across County Fermanagh and its hinterlands*

Community energy presents an opportunity for us to reflect upon our relationship with energy, and has the potential to produce significant benefits for Northern Ireland. This is particularly relevant against the backdrop of rising fuel prices and fuel poverty. It is also important given the Northern Ireland Executive's renewable energy targets and the move to a low carbon economy.

The role of communities was discussed and it was highlighted that communities cannot simply take a passive or reactive role in relation to energy. Communities must be proactive and seize opportunities to become involved in energy projects, or where possible become partners. This could mean for example developing their own community energy project or seeking to work in partnership with other bodies, including the private sector or government, in order to develop a project.

The definition of community energy was then expanded upon. Community energy broadly comprises of four main areas, namely, generating energy (electricity and heat); reducing energy; managing energy; and purchasing energy. The emphasis of community energy projects is on local engagement, leadership and control, and project outcomes which benefit local communities and can be developed by a broad range of organisations. This includes for example community groups, individuals, businesses, landowners, local authorities and housing associations.

It was highlighted that a wide range of different types of community energy projects can exist from the installation of renewable electricity systems or renewable heat systems, to collective purchasing or the installation of energy saving measures in people's homes etc. Given that many local communities in both urban and rural settings face many challenges, particularly in the current economic climate, community energy clearly presents an opportunity to help tackle these. This approach can help to contribute to economic growth; provide a long term sustainable income for communities; help to tackle fuel poverty; and reduce energy bills. Other benefits include the ability of community energy to help empower and give autonomy to local people and strengthen local communities.



## Making the Most of Energy and Renewable Energy Opportunities for the Scottish People

**Steven Watson, Community Energy Scotland**

*Community Energy Scotland is a registered charity that provides practical help for communities on green energy development and energy conservation*

In Scotland, community energy has experienced significant growth in recent years and a range of actors have been important in helping to deliver this. This has included a top level commitment by the Scottish Government and the supportive policy framework which it has put in place.

The supportive framework has involved setting a target for Scotland to achieve 500MW of community and locally owned renewable energy by 2020, and the establishment of the Community and Renewable Energy Scheme (CARES) which provides support for communities and rural businesses wishing to develop renewable energy schemes.

The creation of exemplars in Scotland has been important in encouraging the uptake of community energy. Successful exemplars of communities who have developed community energy projects have provided inspiration and lessons for others, who have in turn explored the potential of developing their own project. A trusted support body which makes communities aspirations a reality is also essential. Community Energy Scotland, through its advice and support, has provided this service and has played a key role in the development of community energy in Scotland.

Attention was then drawn to community energy's ability to be developed in a range of different settings, whether it be in homes or on buildings, on leased ground or on estates; in partnership with others; or on publically owned land. An example of community energy being developed on publically owned land is the development of renewable energy on Scotland's National Forest Estate - this has as created opportunities for communities to avail of community ownership and community benefit from wind and hydro projects.

However community energy is not simply about generating power and can encompass a broad range of projects, including those that reduce energy use and manage energy demand. It also takes place on a range of scales including at local, national and global levels. Though regardless of the scale, community energy always connects people with energy.

The returns of community energy are enormous in terms of the environment; community investment; community empowerment; contributing to the local economy; developing skills; improving self reliance; providing greater energy security; meeting national and European policy; and encouraging innovation. Importantly community energy can act as a community development tool and drive change, which in turn can unlock social capital and volunteer potential.

There is therefore an **imperative to act now**. Community energy is an investment in people, places, support and technology. The appropriate policies need to be in place and it is essential that a proactive approach is taken to ensure that opportunities are maximised.

## Creating a Community Energy Revolution

**Will Dawson, Community Energy Coalition & Principal Sustainability Advisor with Forum for the Future**

*Forum for the Future is an independent non-profit working globally with business, government and other organisations to solve complex sustainability challenges.*



We are currently witnessing changes to our energy system including the move to decarbonise. As part of this transition, it is necessary to bring benefits for everyone in order to support these changes. Communities taking action and having greater control over their own energy are therefore extremely important steps.

Indeed community energy is thriving across the world against this backdrop. The UK itself has seen substantial growth in the development of community energy in recent years and there are a range of organisations which support the sector. Some of these organisations can be found in the Community Energy Coalition. Formed in 2011, the Community Energy Coalition (CEC) is a group of trusted and influential civic society organisations and sustainable energy experts, working to help enable communities take control of their energy.

The CEC aims to ignite an energy revolution which places communities at its heart and strives for a clean, affordable and secure energy system for all. The Community Energy Coalition has set out a vision for community energy in the UK by 2020. This includes enabling all communities to collectively play a substantial role in meeting the UK's carbon and renewable energy targets, giving everyone an equal opportunity to own and control shared assets democratically, and increasing the scale of investment in renewable energy and energy saving.

Important to the development of community energy is the support of government, and in January 2014, the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) published the UK Government's first ever Community Energy Strategy. The Strategy sets out the role which communities can play in helping to meet the UK's energy and climate change challenges. The Rt Hon Edward Davey MP, Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change has already stated that he wants '...to see a community energy revolution in the UK' and clearly this Strategy will play an important role in driving community energy forward and opening up new opportunities for communities.

Finally the aspects of a community energy revolution were discussed, with community energy being acknowledged as playing a large part in the transition to a clean, efficient, secure and affordable energy supply. Such a transition would involve higher levels of ownership, self sufficiency and resilience on the part of communities.

## Next Steps

**Lauri McCusker,  
Director of The Fermanagh Trust**

*The Fermanagh Trust is an independent community based foundation which supports local communities and groups across County Fermanagh and its hinterlands.*

## Advancing Community Energy: What Needs to Be Done to Advance Community Energy in Northern Ireland?

It was highlighted that there is significant potential for the Northern Ireland Executive, relevant government departments, the private sector and local communities to learn from best practice towards community energy. There are a series of key areas which The Fermanagh Trust believes need to be addressed in order to advance community energy in Northern Ireland.

These areas include:

### 1. Coherent vision for community energy

The Executive to set out a clear vision and commitment to developing community energy in Northern Ireland. Strong leadership and resources from government would help to accelerate community energy development.

### 2. Embed community energy within policy

It is important that energy and planning policy support community energy. In Scotland, for example the Scottish Government has set a target of achieving 500MW of community and locally owned renewable energy by 2020. Northern Ireland needs to have clear targets in place to encourage the uptake of community energy.

### 3. Joined-Up Government

A number of Departments have made commitments in relation to advancing the various strands of community energy and tackling fuel poverty. There appears to be a significant opportunity under the Delivering Social Change framework to link these together, actively resource and

provide real impetus to harness the range of opportunities to improve people's lives.

### 4. Coordinated advice and support services

A supportive framework needs to be place to help advance community energy projects and to support communities develop renewable energy schemes at a local level. Bryson Energy is an excellent example of a social enterprise helping to change attitudes and behaviour, and promote action by householders and not-for-profit organisations in areas including energy efficiency; renewable energy; low carbon transport; water and waste.

### 5. Incentivising community energy

Currently the mechanisms through which renewable energy is incentivised are undergoing reform. It is important that strong government support for renewable energy continues.

### 6. Community ownership

Building on the DECC Community Energy Strategy, commercial wind developers should be encouraged to offer host





communities the opportunity to invest / have a stake in renewable energy developments. This is particularly the case on public land. In Denmark for example, the Promotion of Renewable Energy Act requires a duty on the developer of a wind turbine to offer at least 20% of the shares in the wind turbine to those with an option to purchase.

**7. Grid connection**

A major challenge for community energy projects can be connecting to the electricity grid. It is important that the Distribution Network Operator actively facilitates connection for community energy projects.

**8. Financial framework and access to finance and support**

The Government should introduce a supportive financial framework for community energy. The European Union offers substantial opportunities to advance community energy through knowledge transfer and financial support.

**9. Planning at local level**

Councils will have increased powers under the Reform of Public Administration (RPA), including community planning. The creation of 'Local Energy Plans' could help to map a more sustainable future for communities.

Under RPA there is also the possibility via community planning of establishing pathfinder local authorities to advance work in this area.

**10. Community benefit funds**

Financial contributions from community funds need to be used effectively and in the most meaningful way possible. How community benefit funds are delivered is shaped by the local context and there is not a one size fits all approach.

**11. Public sector led examples**

The public sector working with communities to develop community energy projects can act as exemplars and become templates of partnership working to inspire other communities to develop their own projects. The project involving Ballymena District Council and several community clusters is one local example of how this may be done. The development of forestry land for wind farms by DARD and the Forest Service has significant potential to ensure communities can benefit from the development of renewable energy on public land.

**12. Community capability and capacity**

There needs to be a coherent sustained strategy to help communities engage in and benefit from community energy initiatives.



**Closing Comments**

*Phil Flanagan MLA, Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.*

Mr Flanagan highlighted the importance of the day's event and thanked the speakers for their contribution.

**Conclusion**

The event demonstrated opportunities going forward for strengthening the relationship between communities and energy. Community benefits are often associated with wind energy developments, but there are other ways for communities to become engaged and involved in energy projects. Community energy presents a way of doing so and has seen significant growth in recent times, with growing recognition and action taken being by government and civic society in this field.



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Supported by Building Change Trust



Fermanagh House  
Broadmeadow Place  
Enniskillen,  
Co. Fermanagh,  
BT74 7HR

T: 028 6632 0210 E: [info@fermanaghtrust.org](mailto:info@fermanaghtrust.org)  
[www.fermanaghtrust.org](http://www.fermanaghtrust.org)