



centre for
sustainable
energy

An evaluation of the Powering Up project

Summary report

December 2021

1. Introduction

This document summarises the findings from our Powering Up project (2017-2020).

Powering Up was a project run by the Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE), funded by the Friends Provident Foundation, to support the development of community energy projects in three low-income communities. The project ran for three years in three communities – Duffryn in Newport, Penhill in Swindon and Hamp in Bridgwater.

Through our work at CSE we have found that the current energy system undermines local resilience, particularly in lower-income communities which are less able to proactively benefit from it (e.g. through installing domestic solar PV), with the money that residents spend on their gas and electricity leaving the local economy, benefitting national or international energy companies. In these three communities we explored approaches to stimulating sustained grassroots action on energy which aimed to be empowering, improve household and community-scale energy resilience, and build agency within these local communities and their institutions.

2. Project activities

The Powering Up activities were in four stages:

1. **Ethnographic research**, to better understand residents' daily experiences and understandings of the energy system (in partnership with Bath University; the full ethnographic report is available [here](#)).
2. **Engagement and awareness raising** to start engaging with the three communities on the topic of energy and show practical examples of what community-led action on energy could look like. This included: undertaking desktop research to identify key community groups, actors, spaces and events; and then running activities such as slow-cooker and draught proofing workshops, household thermal image surveys, outreach in schools and running a regular energy advice service.
3. **Capacity building activities** with a few engaged residents in each community, to upskill them to deliver community-led action on energy. This included CSE running: scoping workshops to discuss communities strengths and challenges; energy essentials training to upskill the communities in giving energy advice; social media and campaign training; running energy awareness sessions through Swindon Council's Adult Community Learning service and training staff to enable them to continue this offer; and running an energy champions initiative.
4. **Capturing and sharing learning and resources more widely** (this is ongoing).

Despite reaching relatively large numbers of people in each community, limited progress was achieved in Duffryn and Hamp through the engagement activities. As a result project work ended in these 2 communities within the first 18 months of engagement work, so that the project team could focus effort in Penhill and Swindon more widely.

3. What were the outcomes?

As a result of the project's activities, key outcomes for the 3 communities were:

- **Increased energy literacy:** the awareness raising and engagement events improved the energy literacy of the residents that the project team engaged with. It was estimated that through these activities, the CSE team achieved light touch engagement with 600 people, and more in-depth engagement with 19 people. For some members of the communities, this literacy was deepened by attending some of CSE's capacity building workshops.
- **Energy and bill savings:** indirectly through residents' increased energy literacy, and more directly through home energy visits, bespoke in-depth energy advice, supporting residents access fuel vouchers, and installing home energy improvements.
- **Resident-led activities** (focussed in Penhill and other areas of Swindon), which included: having an energy information stall at an 'eco' festival and regular community café; ongoing informal energy advice provision (in-person, via leaflets/posters and through social media platforms); engaging with local councillors, schools, food banks and businesses on energy advice; and writing news pieces for local newsletters. Through resident-led in-person engagement, it is estimated that an additional 140 residents were engaged and supported.
- **Building energy links between residents and Swindon Council**, which manifested in numerous ways: Swindon Council's Adult Community Learning team were upskilled in energy awareness so that they could continue to run energy courses for residents; members of the council's climate emergency 'Buildings' group met with 3 energy champions and retrofit professionals to explore ideas and funding for a low-cost community retrofit project; a motion was put forward and passed by Swindon Council supporting the setting up of a Community Interest Company to promote energy efficiency and fuel poverty prevention (the project team worked with a Swindon Councillor to ensure the motion referenced fuel poverty and the important role of energy advice and community volunteers); and the council's Affordable Warmth Officer became the new point of contact for the energy champions.
- **Additional social outcomes:** the capacity building activities gave engaged residents information, knowledge, and confidence to enable them to be more empowered in engaging with the energy system, and also to support others.

4. What did we learn?

Project framing

We approached our engagement work with an 'open-design' approach, with the aim of residents defining the nature and scope of activities. We learnt this approach was a barrier in itself to people engaging, as it put too much onus on the residents too early on to decide what the project would look like for them. As a result we found it difficult to build resident interest and momentum at the beginning of the project. This emphasised the importance of clear 'asks' or 'calls to action' to

engage residents; additional SMART objectives can then be co-created with residents once a meaningful group has been engaged.

The 'energy disconnect'

We found that the topic of energy, however it was communicated, did not elicit enough interest in residents to engage them in the project. We think this is because residents in these communities consider the energy system to be out of their control; at the same time, energy is associated with bills and domesticity and not something to act on collectively in a community. The project team's more hands-on approach, with the delivery of fun activities, did increase engagement but it still remained challenging to shift workshop engagement into sustained interest in the project.

Intervention fatigue

Intervention fatigue was an experience of many residents. This, combined with a lack of experience or expectation amongst residents that they would be invited to co-design or deliver projects, may have hampered the project team's ability to successfully engage residents in the Powering Up project. This emphasised the importance of having a good understanding of the track record of a community's experience of other externally-led schemes and people's feelings about those projects.

External & sporadic engagement

A significant barrier to the project was not being locally based in order that the project team could have a very regular on-the-ground presence in each community, particularly during the engagement and awareness raising stage of the project. It is clear that delivering projects through anchor organisations that are embedded in, and know their community well, is critical for project success. Alongside this, the design and scope of these projects need to be co-created with these anchor organisations to ensure the project speaks to community priorities and that their staff time is well resourced.

Community connectors

A key learning from this project is the importance of 'community connectors' – these were people working in local institutions or *active* local residents who became engaged with the project through attending local events or via direct engagement. Community connectors are important because they know, and are known by, the community, making engagement with other residents easier. However, they are also often already over-committed, so getting other people involved too is critical for project resilience.

Retention of volunteers

A key and ongoing struggle for the Powering Up team was recruiting and sustaining willing local volunteers able to develop and take forward action in each of the three communities. Even when residents did show interest as a result of the project team's engagement, and attended capacity building activities, this was mostly not sustained. Reasons for this are multiple but included: over-reliance on already-busy community connectors; residents having full lives with competing priorities

and responsibilities; the open-design of the project; the lack of a local anchor organisation; and the lack of a stable project group exacerbated the willingness of new volunteers to remain engaged

Broader context

The broader social, economic and political context influenced the project's momentum and trajectory. The timing of the project in terms of broader policy support mechanisms for renewable energy was unfortunate with the announcement of the end of the feed-in-tariff scheme in the first year of Powering Up's on-the-ground engagement activities (restricting options for potential community-scale renewable energy schemes).

At the same time, in late 2018 and through 2019, from a low level there was renewed public awareness and political focus on climate change. This resulted from the youth climate strikes, Extinction Rebellion activity, and wave of climate emergency declarations that were passed at different political scales – with the first passed in November 2018, 74% of District, County, Unitary and Metropolitan Councils had declared a climate emergency by the end of 2020. These declarations created political commitments that community initiatives and campaigning could hook onto – something that was clearly demonstrated by activities in Swindon. Projects need to be ready to capitalise on changing policy and societal contexts, helping local people recognise the relevance to their own situation and what could be achieved locally.