



centre for
sustainable
energy

Powering Up Evaluation

Friends Provident Foundation

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Contents

1. Introduction	3
1.1. Project background and aims	3
1.2. Selecting communities and project development	3
1.3. Overview of the three communities	4
1.4. Evaluation report and methodology	5
2. Stage 1: Engagement & awareness raising activities	6
2.1. Activities	6
2.2. Outcomes	8
2.2.1. Increased energy literacy	8
2.2.2. Energy & bill savings	8
2.2.3. Additional social outcomes	8
2.3. Learnings	9
2.3.1. Project framing	9
2.3.2. The 'energy disconnect'	9
2.3.3. The benefits and pitfalls of working with local stakeholders	11
2.3.4. Intervention fatigue	13
2.3.5. External & sporadic engagement	14
2.3.6. Community connectors	15
3. Stage 2: Capacity building activities	16
3.1. Activities	16
3.2. Outcomes	18
3.2.1. Volunteer-led activities	18
3.2.2. Knowledge & confidence-building	20
3.2.3. Increased community energy literacy, plus energy & bill savings	20
3.2.4. Swindon Council's support of community-level retrofit & fuel poverty action	21
3.3. Learnings	22
3.3.1. Retention of volunteers	22
3.3.2. Shifting ownership from the project team to community members	23
4. Reach of the programme & volunteer profiles	24
4.1. Reach of programme – in numbers	24
4.2. Portraits of 3 project volunteers	24
5. Overarching learning	27
6. Conclusions	30

1. Introduction

1.1. Project background and aims

‘Powering Up’ was a project launched 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 and thereby ‘build capacity for energy resilience’. The project was scheduled to run for three and a half years in three communities, namely Duffryn in Newport, Penhill in Swindon and Hamp in Bridgwater.

The current energy system undermines local resilience – deprived communities in particular experience fuel poverty and the impacts of climate change; and those not strictly classified as fuel poor may find energy bills unaffordable, be exposed to fluctuating energy prices, and be living in cold and damp homes. The money that people spend on their heating and electricity leaves the local economy, benefitting national or international energy companies. Resident-led community energy initiatives that emerge to address some of these issues have historically been more prevalent in higher income communities, where people have more capacity, money and resources to start and run such projects.

Against this backdrop, Powering Up aimed, through working in three low-income communities, to explore: *“approaches to stimulating sustained grassroots action on energy which is genuinely empowering, improves household and community-scale energy resilience, and builds agency within these local communities and their institutions”*. Powering Up was intended to support the emergence of local community energy activity in these communities which was led by residents and based on their needs and interests. For this reason, the nature of the energy project was not pre-defined at the outset. The project’s secondary aim was to learn from this process of building community energy activities, about the barriers communities face in order to inform best practices for other projects. Finally, the third aim was to support the three local communities in such a way that energy projects could develop which would not require long-term external support, so that when the funded ‘Powering Up’ project ended, the community energy activities would be able to continue by themselves.

1.2. Selecting communities and project development

The three communities were chosen on the basis that they experience high relative rates of multiple deprivation, had no prior community energy projects and were relatively close to Bristol (where CSE is based). An initial data set of 24,000 LSOAs was reduced to 120 by selecting for ones that fell within the project’s categorisation of ‘left-behind’ communities. The team then shortlisted 11 areas with clusters of these LSOAs (so as to create a big enough community to work with), determined the accurate boundaries of a ‘real’ community, selected for proximity to Bristol and considered what was already happening in each community; from this sift, 3 communities were chosen.

To ‘ground check’ the community selection, for each of these 3 communities the project team spoke with people from the council and local organisations/initiatives about the project, gauge their thoughts on running the project in that community, learn about existing community activity, and

develop a plan for how to go about recruiting households for the first project step of ethnographic work. As a result of this ground-checking, one of our chosen communities was changed.

The project then progressed in four stages:

1. **Ethnographic research:** In partnership with Bath University, ethnographic research was conducted with 3 households in each community, to better understand residents' daily experiences and understandings of the energy system. It was also hoped that the participating households would remain engaged in the project going forward. The full ethnographic report is available here: <https://www.cse.org.uk/downloads/reports-and-publications/community-energy/renewables/behaviour-change/powering-up-ethnographic-report.pdf>
2. **Engagement & awareness raising:** Building on the ethnographic research, members of the Powering Up team undertook stakeholder mapping to identify people and organisations to engage on the project, and started to attend and run local events to raise awareness of the project in each community. The team also ran a variety of workshops and meetings with the aim of helping individuals to develop ideas for energy activities that could be tried out.
3. **Capacity building:** When the project had a few residents who were consistently engaged, the Powering Up team ran capacity building workshops, building skills to support the residents to engage in, co-create, and deliver energy activities. This stage continued through the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a significant impact on project development and delivery.
4. **Capturing and sharing learning more widely:** Over the duration of the project, the Powering Up team captured and shared what they learnt with a variety of audiences. Learning was shared through: a series of CSE blogs; blogs for other organisation's websites and communication channels (Community Energy England, Swindon Climate Action Network, Friends Provident Foundation website, Friends of the Earth (website and internal Slack platform for all their community groups)); and talks at a variety of events (SCAN's Climate Café, Action with Communities in Rural England's Zero Carbon event, the Fuel Poverty Research Network's annual conference, and at a Big Local event).

1.3. Overview of the three communities

Duffryn

Duffryn is a community in the south of Newport, Wales. It is a large housing estate of 2 tiered terrace housing, completed in 1978. The estate is heated through a district heating system. The community has a family centre, a primary school and two neighbouring secondary schools. Sixteen percent of the housing is owner-occupied, with the rest being social and local authority housing.

In Duffryn, the project paid a local community representative, previously employed as part of the Welsh Government's Communities First programme¹, to support the project on the ground. The project was successful in this community in engaging with the local primary school through

¹ This programme sought to tackle poverty in the most deprived communities across Wales through a partnership approach. See [Written Statement - Closure of the Communities First Programme \(19 April 2018\)](#)

assemblies and solar energy workshops, but engagement did not spread to the wider community via parents, as had been hoped. CSE ended its engagement in Duffryn in April 2019 after 16 months of on-the-ground engagement as this had resulted in little sustained resident engagement.

Hamp

Hamp is a community in the south of Bridgwater, Somerset. 49% of the housing is owner-occupied, 14% is privately-rented, and the remaining is a mix of social and local authority housing. Hamp has a primary school, two secondary schools, and a YMCA. During the course of the project, a local community hub opened up which acted as an important location for our activities and engagement with the community. The project succeeded in 'light' engagement with a variety of relevant local actors, including the local energy advisor for Homes in Sedgemoor tenants, one of the local 6th form colleges, and the community association. Although engagement was successful in this community to start with, it was a challenge to encourage residents to invest further in the project and co-deliver activities. CSE ended its engagement in the Hamp community in January 2020.

Penhill

Penhill is a community in the north of Swindon consisting of a mixture of terraced and semi-detached housing, and high-rise blocks. The community has a primary and secondary school, a children's centre, and a community hall. 27% of the housing is owner-occupied, with the remaining local authority housing. Unlike the other two communities, there was a lot of local community activity already in Penhill – including a network of 'Street Reps' and 'Junior Reps' (a scheme run by the local Housing Officer, which consists of a group of local residents who are committed to making a difference in their community), which was critical for the project's early engagement activities.

Although engagement was slow to begin with, Powering Up gained most traction in Penhill. This was primarily because of an enthusiastic resident who through their engagement with the project, and their commitment to their community and environmental activities, became the community's informal energy champion. For this reason, CSE decided to focus its attention and resources in this community till the project ended in March 2021.

1.4. Evaluation report and methodology

The purpose of this evaluation is to summarise Powering Up project activities, the outcomes of these, and the lessons learned, in order to inform others considering similar undertakings in the future. The report is structured around the 2 key stages of the project: 1) engagement and awareness raising, and 2) capacity building. Following this are overarching conclusions and recommendations. The evidence reviewed for the evaluation was gathered by the team throughout the project, via reflective blogs, learning logs, workshops, interviews, and end of year reports.

2. Stage 1: Engagement & awareness raising activities

2.1. Activities

The Powering Up team started engagement through undertaking desktop stakeholder mapping research and identifying key community spaces and events. The team then piggy backed various events hosted by others in the community, including community cafes, summer fetes, community hub launches and agency networking events. The team also spent time in community spaces like the Forest Centre in Duffryn and the Hub in Hamp, and arranged specific group meetings with stakeholders. We estimate that we engaged with around 250 people through the project team's attendance at over 20 such opportunities in community spaces.

The project team then delivered practical and hands-on activities to nurture further interest within the target communities. The majority of these engagement activities took place across the course of 2018. Detailed below are the practical activities that the team delivered during this engagement and awareness raising stage of the project.

Slow-cooker workshop (1x Hamp): Hamp's new community hub provided a useful space to bring people together and deliver activities. The team ran a slow-cooker demonstration workshop – based on previous project experience, the team knew the benefit of widening activities beyond a focus on energy, to topics such as healthy meals and feeding families for less. While food was cooking, residents chatted in groups about smart meters and issues with single glazing, and shared energy saving advice. This was delivered in partnership with the local housing provider's energy advisor.

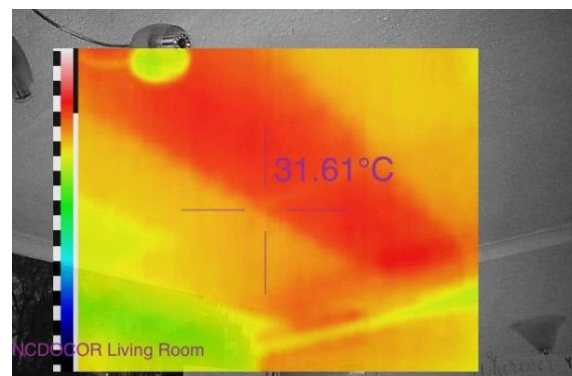
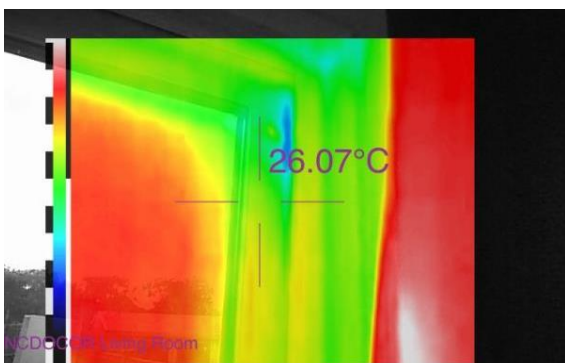
Draught-proofing workshop (1x Duffryn, 2x Penhill): The turnout for these workshops was good, showing people's enthusiasm for hands on activities, which present practical low-cost energy saving measures that people can implement themselves, such as making their own draught excluders. These workshops also provided a space in which to talk more generally about energy issues and efficiency measures.

Household thermal-imaging surveys (2x households in Penhill & 1x talk at the street rep café): The Powering Up team organised household thermal-imaging surveys for 2 households in Penhill (this was done through a Bristol-based not-for-profit Community Interest Company called *Cold Homes Energy Efficiency Survey Experts* (CHEESE)). The surveys provide visual images of where a building is losing heat, and makes recommendations for how to remedy losses. Previous work has shown that homes which receive internal thermal images of heat loss are more likely to install energy efficiency measures. The Powering Up team hoped the surveys would be an effective engagement tool and organised a community event where surveyors spoke to residents about the surveys and the results.

Schools (2x assemblies, several community volunteer led solar kit workshops in Duffryn): The Powering Up team engaged with a local primary school and delivered 2 assemblies and solar workshops where the school children could see how solar energy could move a propeller and wheels. Together with the school's family engagement officer, possibilities for widening engagement to the broader community were considered.

Energy advice service (one-off events in Penhill & Duffryn; weekly energy advice hubs in Hamp): Powering Up began to run a monthly energy advice stall in the newly-opened community hub in

Hamp. The idea was that energy advice is always useful and having a regular presence would increase the likelihood of meeting people and getting to know each other.



2.2. Outcomes

Outlined below are the key outcomes from the engagement and awareness raising stage of the project.

2.2.1. Increased energy literacy

The awareness raising and engagement events improved the energy literacy of the people that the project team engaged with; this was particularly the case in the hands-on events, which provided more time for giving bespoke advice and engaging participants in energy-related activities. Across these events it is estimated that CSE achieved light touch engagement with 600 people, and more in-depth engagement with 19 people.

In Hamp CSE worked in partnership with the local housing provider's energy advisor in delivering sessions – she commented on the positive impact that the energy advice sessions had, despite low attendance levels: *“In terms of the volume of people coming in it was not successful, but in terms of the quality of the meetings that we had with the people who did, I would say that it was quite successful, in that we were able to share quite a lot of information with those people where they didn't really understand, in-depth, about how energy worked, so we were able to give them a few tips, pieces of advice”*.

2.2.2. Energy & bill savings

It is more difficult to gauge the degree to which improved energy literacy translated into energy and/or bill savings. There are examples of direct interventions made to residents' homes or their energy bill management:

- In Penhill 2 homes received thermal imaging surveys, and as a result improvements were made by the council to 1 of these homes after the tenant showed the thermal image survey video to the housing ombudsman (because of inaction by the council). The improvements included: installing a larger radiator, replacing ineffective double glazing, replacing front and back doors and installing a new room thermostat to allow for better temperature control.
- In Hamp 1 home received a home energy visit, during which bespoke energy advice was given and draught proofing measures were installed.
- 10 people received bespoke energy advice at energy advice sessions, such as being signed up to the Warm Homes Discount.

2.2.3. Additional social outcomes

Whilst difficult to measure, the variety of engagement and awareness raising activities that the project team delivered would have had varying degrees of positive social outcomes – through members of the community coming together, engaging with each other, building energy knowledge and confidence and sharing ideas and practice. Hamp's local housing provider's energy advisor refers to this when discussing the slow cooker event: *“I think when you're offering free things and food it always helps and that certainly went down a treat, everybody really thoroughly enjoyed that, in fact,*

we even had the local police officers coming in for a bite... when you're dishing out food, it's quite a good opportunity to talk to people quite freely, then. We did have quite in-depth conversations with a couple of families about the way they use their energy and what it's like with children in the home, that type of thing. So, in that respect, it was very successful".

2.3. Learnings

Outlined below are the key learnings from the engagement and awareness raising stage of the project.

2.3.1. Project framing

The project started with an 'open design', with the intention that engaged residents could themselves, with support from the project team, define the nature and scope of activities. This stemmed from the project seeking to try an alternative approach to traditional energy interventions in low-income communities which are mostly designed *for* local people rather than with and by them. However, in practice the project team found it very difficult to build resident interest and momentum at the beginning of the project. This approach put too much onus on the residents from early on, especially given the concept of 'community energy' was new to many of them, and did not give a clear project identity, to which the residents could relate and decide if it was something they were interested to engage with. Also, residents are likely to have been used to the legacy of 'service'-style projects in their communities. This is articulated by one of the project volunteers Clare: *"I think other people would find it a hard thing to get involved with because they weren't really clear about what was required of them... I know you need to get out there in the community and find out what people want, but I think you also have to have some idea of what it is that you've got to offer, rather than just say, well, once we've got you involved in this, where would we like to go with it further? But I think we needed, perhaps, slightly clearer aims."* (Clare).

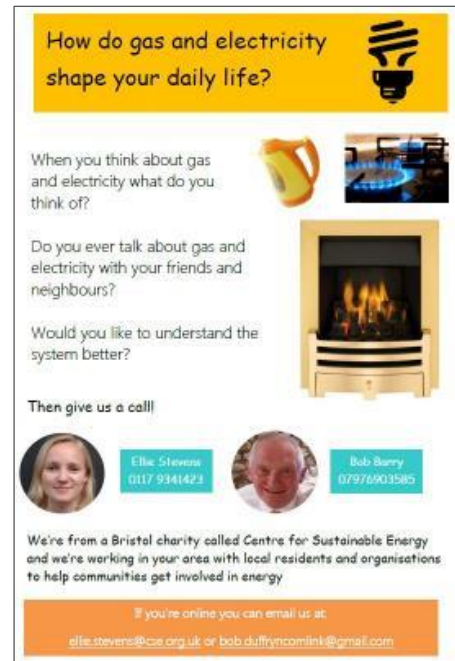
The success of the energy champion stage of Powering Up reconfirms this – with a clear project identity, and a programme of training and support, it was relatively quick and easy to recruit energy champions.

From this experience the Powering Up team learnt of the importance of having SMART project objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely) and project 'asks' or 'calls to action' to engage residents and give them a clear idea of what their contribution to a project could look like. Additional SMART objectives can be co-created with residents once there is a meaningful group engaged.

2.3.2. The 'energy disconnect'

Through its multiple forms of communication, the project team sought to use energy-related language that was meaningful to residents (highlighted through the ethnographic work) – for example, 'gas and electricity' rather than 'energy'. However, the team found that the topic of energy, however it was communicated, did not elicit enough interest in residents to engage them in the project. We suggest this 'energy disconnect' is for a few reasons:

- Energy is associated with bills and domesticity and the energy system is considered beyond a person's control – other than through switching provider, and even here many people are so disengaged with the energy market that they do not check tariffs or switch suppliers, with energy bills seen as inevitable. One Penhill resident and project volunteer, Kate, describes this: *"It's the sort of thing that people don't really think about unless they have to. Suddenly they get an £180 quid a month electric bill, then they're thinking about it but, in terms of day to day, it's not really at the forefront of everybody's mind"*.
- Energy is not considered to be something to act on collectively, and the energy system is not seen as something that a community can engage with – in the three Powering Up communities there was little awareness of community energy initiatives. Therefore it was not immediately obvious to residents how or why they should engage with the Powering Up project.
- Many residents felt that they were already making the simple changes that they could to reduce energy use and keep their bills down (of course, low-income households are already the lowest energy consumers) – and so did not see how an energy project would be of relevance to them. To achieve further noticeable financial savings they would have to cut their home energy use in ways that would impact on their quality of life – such as heating the home less. For many, the only way to achieve bigger savings is through physical improvements to their home and heating system – for social housing or private rental tenants this responsibility rests with their landlord, and for home owners such changes may be unaffordable especially in low-income communities.



In response to these factors, one of the project team describes their efforts to make the energy system and community energy activities tangible and meaningful: *"It is possible that the overarching barrier was the topic of energy itself not being engaging enough for it to be prioritised over other commitments. After initial difficulties to engage people, switching to a low-key delivery-focused approach brought residents together and initiated conversations on energy. This included hands on and fun activities, like draught proofing and slow cooker workshops, which make energy topics more tangible"*. The project team also sought to ensure that their messaging did not focus solely on money saving (given most people were already low energy users), but brought in broader quality of life themes (e.g. relating to comfort, addressing damp, improving health).

Whilst the team's more hands-on approach did garner more resident interest, ultimately they found it very difficult to shift resident engagement with specific workshops into sustained interest in the project. Making greater connections to existing environmental initiatives in the communities may have been beneficial for engagement, as well as giving the Powering Up project a broader environmental focus – something that the project team avoided, especially in the beginning of the project, as they were not confident that environmental messaging would garner interest (perhaps even feared it would put off people).

One topic that the team did find enthusiasm for was clean and renewable energy – although this was considered to be out of reach and only available to wealthier people. Iris, one of the project volunteers, shared her thoughts on this: *“If they weren’t buying into it then it was because they already knew, ‘cause a lot of the stuff you’re talking about people know... people don’t have the money, it’s a poor area. I think the only real buy in you would have got is if you’d have tried to do something like a windmill or solar panels or something like that... (Something that) saves money. They’ve got no money, nobody’s got any money up there and if they’re saving on their power bills it’ll be fantastic”*. 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).

2.3.3. The benefits and pitfalls of working with local stakeholders

Any community-based project will need to engage with the institutions, organisations, and groups that are active in that community. During the awareness raising and engagement stage of the Powering Up project, the team engaged with multiple stakeholders as a way of spreading the word about the project, build understanding of what existing initiatives were happening in the different communities, and to start to identify which organisations would be interested to partner during the project. Below are key learnings from the team’s stakeholder engagement during this first stage.

Council –

- Based on an understanding of different officer responsibilities, the project team directed their communications to those whose job remit overlapped with the project’s aims. The project team managed to engage with the council’s Affordable Warmth officer and their Housing Officer; the latter of which provided a very useful link to the Street Reps programme they had established in council housing areas of Swindon, and which had been most successful in Penhill. The Street Reps proved critical to engaging with residents in the early days of the project. Putting effort into identifying council officers with a similar remit and approach to supporting neighbourhood-level community activity can enable energy-focused activity to reach more people and be sustained beyond one-off activities.
- Another key learning is that changing council priorities can change how willing officers or councillors are to working together. Project teams need to be ready to take advantage of the new opportunities that may emerge suddenly. In January 2020 Swindon Council declared a climate emergency: this followed a wave of climate emergency declarations across local authorities, which started in 2018. In the last stages of the project this ‘hook’ provided an opportunity to engage further with the council in a way which wasn’t forthcoming at the beginning when the political and societal context was different.

Housing providers –

- Homes in Sedgemoor was the key housing provider in Hamp. Early desk-based research revealed that it was running an energy advice project. This was an obvious in-road for the Powering Up team – they engaged with Homes in Sedgemoor’s energy advisor and co-delivered

a few events during the awareness raising stage of the project. This relationship was mutual in that the energy advisor was grateful for additional support in delivering her role, and she supported the team in their early-stage engagement. Housing officers can be another key ally in building engagement. It is important to forge alliances within the local network of support providers to create new entry points for reaching the community. This may also help to build trust amongst local residents about the legitimacy of the project.

Schools –

- The project team sought to build connections with the primary and secondary schools in each of the communities – recognising them as important community institutions – but it was only in Duffryn where this proved successful. In Hamp, one of the science teachers at the secondary school was familiar with CSE and made touch with the project team about working together. However, despite meetings to discuss multiple ideas for what the Powering Up team could do, this never progressed. Generally, severely over-stretched staff capacity in schools restricted the broader success of this engagement.

Working with Duffryn's primary school

In Duffryn the project team successfully engaged and worked with the community's primary school. This was hugely helped by Bob, the project's on-the-ground staff member in Duffryn, having an already established relationship with the primary school's Head.

The project team ran 2 school assemblies and 1 solar workshop, in which the children were shown how to build small circuits in which solar panels powered lights and propellers. These proved so popular that the school Head gave Bob a weekly slot to deliver similar workshops, and the project team developed a kit for the school to run the sessions themselves in the future. These sessions worked well because they were stand-alone and were delivered solely by the project team with no additional staff time required. Building on the solar workshops to deliver more activities in the school was difficult, primarily driven by limited staff capacity to engage further with the



The project team hoped that through the engagement with the school that this would be a route to broader community engagement. However, whilst the team tried to build connections to the parents through the parent engagement staff member and at school-community events, this did not prove successful due to a lack of broader interest and priorities within the school being focussed elsewhere.

- It is clear that any engagement process with schools needs to make clear what they can gain from it. Alternative routes to engagement could be to target eco-schools or engage with existing eco-councils within schools. Endeavouring to fit the timing of engagement with environmental topics on school curricula may help, though this does require co-operation on the side of school staff. Packaging activities in a way that makes it easy for teachers to draw on is also likely to be important. However, given the challenges of finding suitable entry points with schools, it may be that engagement with schools is more suited to a dedicated project rather than part of a project aimed at a community more broadly.

Community networks and groups –

- A well-known recommendation for community engagement is ‘meet people in their spaces and go where people are already gathering’. The project team paid heed to this advice, but they also found this required sensitivity in order that residents did not feel like their chosen activity had been co-opted by intruders!
- Linked to the above, engaging with projects which are a community space – such as the community hub in Hamp, and the community café in Penhill – gave the project team opportunities to be in space which residents felt connected to and frequented for various different reason (and also gave residents more choice to engage (or not)). These spaces proved critical for the project as they began to run hands-on workshops with residents.
- The project team also sought to engage with existing groups and initiatives of a similar ethos – for example, in the case of Penhill there was a conservation project seeking to engage residents with wildlife, and the project team shared learnings and attended their events. However, this did not result in any established joint working – and a key learning from this experience was of the importance, if possible, of creating space to discuss how to collaborate effectively; otherwise it can be difficult to make space for the varying agendas and objectives. Engaging with groups and networks which don’t have specific objectives against which they need to deliver can prove easier – e.g. in Penhill, the team successfully partnered with Swindon Climate Action Network (SCAN), delivering a presentation at their monthly meeting, off the back of which SCAN partnered with the project team in delivering an event in Penhill to show the results of the thermal imaging surveys.

2.3.4. Intervention fatigue

“Penhill gets guinea pigged a lot because we’ve got a really mixed community, we’ve got a range of ages, a range of incomes, a range of private and social housing. So what happens is when people wanna deliver a project or they wanna test something, they like doing it in this area. There’s a feeling amongst residents, very much, that they’re sick of being guinea pigs and they’re sick of things that turn up for a year, do something, everybody gets really excited and engaged and joins in and then, after a year, the person disappears, the project falls flat and that’s it” (Kate, Penhill resident)

“I’ve been involved in community stuff on this estate, 25, 30 years we’ve lived here and all the different stuff, and you see a new one come, oh yeah, yeah, how long have you got funding for? Another one that’s gonna be here today, gone tomorrow... a lot more working together is what is

needed and a lot longer to do it in...You're never gonna get quick fixes if you work in the community, it just doesn't happen, so you've got to be prepared for the longer haul" (Jo, Hamp resident)

In both of these quotes, the community residents describe the 'intervention fatigue' experienced by 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 really successfully engage residents in the Powering Up project.

At the project outset, the team had taken care to identify communities without a prior track record of being involved in an energy-related project. However, possibly more attention was needed early on to understand the track record of the community's experience of other externally-led schemes and people's feelings about those projects.

2.3.5. External & sporadic engagement

A significant barrier to the project was not being locally based in order that the project team could have a regular on-the-ground presence in each community, particularly during the engagement and awareness raising stage of the project.

Iris, one of the project volunteers, emphasised the importance of having a regular presence and being on the ground: *"I think the presence wasn't there very solidly, it was once, I don't know, in a blue moon, or something...You have to be on the ground, be at every engagement meeting, call meetings and if people don't show up get on Facebook, get the buy in from people who have got a lot of sway in the community, have got a lot of people on Facebook."* This was reiterated by a stakeholder in Hamp: *"it is very, very difficult to motivate some people, particularly in that type of area, a lot of them would have had other commitments, as well. I think, really, there needed to be something in it for them and they needed to have encouragement from the people around them, as well...they needed a bigger presence, really, in the area to be that effective and to offer that element of support that people obviously need to carry it forward"*.

Having community connectors or paying local residents for certain roles and involvement in the project might be one possibility for engaging people who already know the community. This was trialled in Duffryn where the project employed a local person with a track record of delivering community support in the area as part of a previously funded programme. However, whilst this resulted in important work with the primary school, it proved harder to build up sustained interest in the project amongst adults.

With the arrival of COVID-19 and engagement going online, although this limited an on-the-ground presence, it ironically did make regular engagement feel more possible for the project team with travelling distance no longer a barrier. When the project team decided to set up the energy champion initiative, they were able to run sessions online more frequently to keep in touch and deliver training. The increased confidence people had in online events, coupled with the project team and community members not having to travel as much, made this part of the project a success.

2.3.6. Community connectors

A key learning from this stage of the project is the importance of ‘community connectors’ – these are key contacts in the community, such as people working in local institutions or *active* local residents who became engaged with the project through attending local events or as a result of the team researching local organisations and contacting them directly. Community connectors are people who are already invested in making their community thrive, and so are more likely to engage with initiatives that can support this. 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.

Community connectors in Penhill

In Penhill, the Powering Up team were lucky to meet two key community connectors very early on who were both active in the community and interested in environmental issues. In January and March 2018, the team met Iris and Kate at the community café run by the local Street Reps.

Iris is a very active resident, involved in lots of initiatives including the Street reps, “Bee Roads” (a Swindon wide pollinator project), a community radio show, Transition Swindon and the Swindon Climate Action Network. Iris is really interested and concerned about environmental issues, especially wildlife. She started a community garden called ‘the Haven’ near her home.

Iris helped coordinate a meeting with Kate, and other members of the community, in her house to discuss ideas for the project. She also helped the team promote the project in the community through her radio show.

Kate became a key volunteer for the project. Here she discusses the importance of being local and known in the community: *“Because I’m just chatty with people, ‘cause it’s local, because it’s peer to peer support, whereas when someone’s sat there with a badge it can be a bit intimidating... with Penhill...it’s a great community..., but you’ve gotta get the buy in from them, you’ve gotta win them over and then once they see it, once they see that you’re doing something, once they see that people, who are well known in the community, are on board, then they’ll get on board... ‘cause they know me, they’re more confident to come up and just ask me questions. I’ve had about two or three, actually, shout me in the street now, it’s like, ‘Oi, what do I do about this?’”*

However, it would have also been beneficial for the project team to have successfully recruited more project volunteers beyond these community connectors as their time and energy was already spread across multiple initiatives already.

3. Stage 2: Capacity building activities

3.1. Activities

Building on the engagement and awareness raising stage of the project, the project team ran workshops with a few engaged residents in each community (39 people attended the capacity-building workshops across the 3 communities), the aims of which were focused on capacity building. Detailed below are the workshops the project team delivered during this second stage.

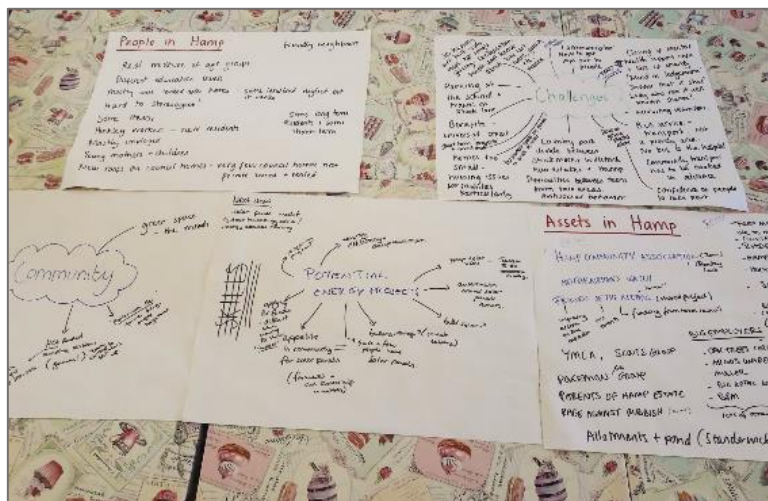
Scoping workshop (1x Hamp): This workshop in Hamp gathered residents together to discuss the communities' strengths and challenges. While energy did not arise as a topic, financial issues did, opening the conversation to discuss energy saving measures. The workshop offered examples of other community energy projects, including residents delivering energy efficiency advice and income generation through energy assets. There was a great deal of enthusiasm for locally owned renewable energy, but residents did not think they had the skills to deliver such projects.

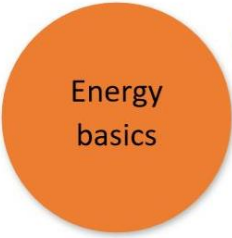
Energy essential training (1x Duffryn, 1x Penhill): In response to residents' expressed lack of knowledge and confidence, training was delivered to Penhill residents to equip them with skills for providing basic energy advice in their community. The training covered topics, such as fuel poverty, and actions including switching energy providers, heating controls and other energy efficiency measures. Residents were given factsheets and materials for use in running their own energy advice stalls. This training was also given to key stakeholders in Duffryn who were working in the community and who the project team hoped to collaborate with.

Social media training for campaigning & awareness raising: This training was offered to residents in Penhill and was the most well-attended session. While the focus was on energy issues, the skills were applicable to any community social media activity, such as managing a Facebook page or promoting events – and the learning was applied immediately for raising awareness of a Penhill Street Reps event.

Swindon Energy champions training programme: Against the Covid-19 backdrop, the project team trained up volunteer residents to become community energy champions in other communities in Swindon. This built on the success of Kate's role as an informal energy champion in Penhill. The idea was to show how an initiative like this can work, and build peer-to-peer support to help build on the legacy of the project in Penhill. 8 energy champions were recruited and a programme of training was established based on the needs and wants of the champions – this covered: draught proofing, damp and mould; switching energy tariffs; and Green Homes Grants. The purpose of these sessions were to help the energy champions build their knowledge and confidence to be able to offer advice in their communities. The sessions were held online on Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions. Alongside the training were monthly meetings, and the energy champions were given access to an online platform where they can share ideas, and which is populated with resources, advice, and contacts.

Adult Community Learning energy sessions: Having tried to engage with the council's adult learning activities earlier in the project without success, the project team finally made some inroads in the project's last 6 months, collaborating with the council's team to deliver 3 online sessions covering basic energy advice topics. The project team have also trained the council's trainers, who will themselves deliver similar sessions at a later date.





Energy basics



Course dates: Thursday 11th February 2021

Course times: 11am – 12pm

Duration: 1 hour

Location: Online



Energy basics

This course will go through the basics of how we use energy in our homes, to help understand where you can make savings on your energy bills. The session will also cover the topic of fuel poverty, and how this impacts households in the UK, where you can get support if you are struggling to stay warm and afford your bills.

To enrol for this course please email our team at adl@swindon.gov.uk or call us on 01793 466482. You can also find details of other planned courses at www.webenrol.com/swindon.

Please note: The Swindon Borough Adult Community Learning Team are funded by the ESFA to engage adults and provide them with the skills and learning they need to progress into work, further learning or volunteering. We offer these courses free of charge to our priority learners who are eligible. To find out if you're eligible for these courses, please contact us or visit <https://www.swindon.gov.uk/adultlearning>.






Become an Energy Champion in your community



We are looking to kick-start a community-led energy advice initiative across communities in and around Swindon.

By being an Energy Champion you will:

- Help others in need in your area to save money on their energy bills
- Help the environment by encouraging others to reduce their energy use
- Develop new knowledge and skills to add to your CV through experience and further training

Join us for an informal information session to find out more

 **Date:** Friday 26th June
Time: 15.30-17.00
Location: Zoom

You can email megan.blyth@cse.org.uk for more info




Energy Essentials Training

An introduction to providing energy advice to householders

Megan Blyth and Ellie Stevens



3.2. Outcomes

Outlined below are the key outcomes from the capacity building stage of the project.

3.2.1. Volunteer-led activities

In some cases (in Penhill and Swindon), the capacity building activities, alongside other engagement, led to members of the community running their own activities and events. We estimate 140 people were reached through these volunteer-led activities.

Eco-fest energy information stall, Penhill: A volunteer co-ran a stall at an eco-fest alongside a member of the project team. She handed out information on improving energy efficiency, kit for making DIY draught excluders and talked to people about lowering energy bills.

Community-led energy advice (Penhill and Energy Champion activities in Swindon): A volunteer in Penhill gave energy advice at the regular Street Rep community café and on an ad-hoc basis, supported at a Swindon Council Warm Homes Discount event, and during the Covid-19 national lockdowns helped 7 people access fuel vouchers and gave 5 people in-depth energy advice over Facebook Messenger. In addition, three of the energy champions have been providing ongoing energy advice to their neighbours.

Energy Champion Sarah describes how the training she received helped her support her neighbour: *“The training has helped me to support a digitally excluded friend to take regular meter readings, which resulted in turning a supposed debt into a healthy balance when accurate meter readings were phoned through to the supplier.”*

Energy champion activities, Swindon: In addition to giving energy advice, energy champions have undertaken other energy awareness raising activities, including: putting up notices about Warm & Safe Wiltshire (the council’s energy advice service) on community noticeboards; posting energy advice on community Facebook pages; engaging with a local church with advice on energy efficiency; engaging with local councillors, businesses and schools to tell them about the energy champions programme; engaging with local food banks; and writing news pieces for local newsletters.

Energy champion Charlotte describes outreach work she has done off the back of training and support the project team gave her: *“I was keen to promote the Warm Homes Discount during December. As I couldn't do it face to face at the usual Christmas events, I visited local groups and businesses, who were very supportive about displaying posters in their windows, on notice boards and in newsletters. It wasn't the same as reaching out in person, but I was really touched by all those who didn't really know me, but just wanted to support those who needed it. I'm looking forward to the lockdown ending, so we can go full steam ahead to help more people to prepare themselves to reduce their energy bills before next winter”.*



Hello from your local Energy Champion!

What is an Energy Champion?

Someone who can engage people in their community to save energy and tackle fuel poverty.

I am part of a network of Energy Champions across Swindon

How can I help?

- I can offer basic energy advice to help people stay warm, save money and be more energy efficient
- I can signpost people and refer them to access support if they are having problems with their energy.

How to get in touch?

Check out our Facebook page for energy saving tips and more info: <https://www.facebook.com/EnergyChampionsSwindon/>

The Energy Champions Swindon initiative is being supported by the Centre for Sustainable Energy

<https://www.cse.org.uk/>

centre for sustainable energy

Energy Champions Swindon

@EnergyChampionsSwindon · Community

Edit Send Message

Home Events Reviews About More

Create ad How would you like to grow your business?

Boost a post Get more messages

Automated ads Get personalised ads that adjust over time to help you get better results.

Create Post

Photo/Video Get Messages Feeling/Activity

Create Live Event Offer Job

Energy Champions Swindon
Published by Constance Carol · 3 March at 15:49 ·

#NetZero #Energy #GreenRecovery #Appliances #EnergyEfficiency

3.2.2. Knowledge & confidence-building

The capacity building activities gave attendees information, knowledge and confidence to enable them to be more empowered in engaging with the energy system, but also to support others. Energy champion, Charlotte, shares her experience: *“it’s been so great to be a part of this and I have learnt a lot! It’s built something really great in Swindon and this approach is really replicable, and if we can do it, anyone can”*. Another project volunteer, Kate, describes what she gained from getting engaged with the project, co-running an event with the project team, and giving energy advice in the community: *“I think I’m definitely more confident to actually take something on my own and go away with it... I’d be a lot more happy to just do that myself, with support, I’d get people involved but, obviously, I’d be much more happy taking charge”*. Kate also describes how her perspective of the role of energy in her community has changed through the project: *“Before it was very much reduce, reduce, reduce and then doing the project ... in this area, specifically, I’ve actually found it’s not always the case. Sometimes people are so much in energy poverty... I knew things like that were going on but I didn’t really have any previous background of any of that side of it. So it’s finding, actually, some people do need to be using a bit more, ‘cause they haven’t got any and they don’t really know how to manage their bills or how to manage their phone”*.

3.2.3. Increased community energy literacy, plus energy & bill savings

As with Powering Up’s engagement activities, this capacity building stage of the project will have also had a positive impact in terms of increasing energy literacy, and energy and bill savings – for example, 7 people received help to access fuel vouchers during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Volunteer Kate describes the energy advice she gave to residents in the community café: *“I’ve had some really good responses in the café, actually. People have been signing up for their discounts that they didn’t know they could even apply, I had to sit there actually do it for a few people. Some have had problems and I’ve ended up ringing their energy company... When you look back and actually add it all up, I’ve talked to about 50 people, you think 50 people’s not that many, but 50 people that were at a café, that’s 50 people that I’m gonna continue seeing out and about in the street”*.

She also stresses the importance of her presence in the community as both a resident and an energy champion in enabling more on-going support and trust building amongst residents: *“Sometimes when you don’t even know the answer, sometimes that disengages them straight away, then that little bit of trust where they’re like, oh, well, I could have just Googled it myself... then they might not go away and do anything with it. Whereas because we’re meeting them out and about, we’re not just meeting them, we’re not scheduling appointments or anything, we actually see them on a regular basis and can actually say, ‘Oh, have you done that yet? Have you switched? How did you find it? Is everything okay?’ And you can do that like checking in”*.

The project team’s work with Swindon Council’s Adult Community Learning team, whilst directly increasing the energy literacy of those who attended the sessions, has also led to an upskilling of the council’s trainers and enabled them to keep running energy awareness courses going forward. This is a really positive Swindon-wide outcome given that energy-related topics had not historically been a part of their adult community learning offering.

3.2.4. Swindon Council's support of community-level retrofit & fuel poverty action

Through the awareness raising and capacity building stages of the project, two strands that the project team had worked to build activity around were: to engage members of Swindon Climate Action Network (SCAN) in the Powering Up project; and to explore opportunities for community-scale retrofit activities in Penhill. A key action bringing these strands together was the completion of two thermal imaging surveys (by the CHEESE Community Interest Company (CIC)²) in Penhill (as described in Chapter 2), and the results being presented to the community with SCAN co-hosting the event. The project team, off the back of this event, then explored with two SCAN members who had experience in household retrofit, the opportunity for building on this and undertaking more surveys, combined with possible retrofit activities focussed on low-income households. For various reasons, including differing priorities of people involved, this line of exploration did not result in a programme of activities.

This interest in community-level retrofit activities then re-emerged when the project team established the energy champions programme – with two of the champions, who were also members of SCAN and knew other retrofit-related stakeholders in Swindon, expressing an interest to explore further the opportunities for community-scale thermal imaging surveys and low-cost retrofit (based on the CHEESE CIC model). To support progress on this idea the project team made touch with the council's newly established climate emergency 'Buildings' sub-group (which includes councillors, council officers, and retrofit stakeholders), and organised for CHEESE representatives to present their work at the sub-group's meeting. The meeting was a brilliant opportunity, not only to learn more about the CHEESE approach but also to stress the opportunity of low-cost retrofit, how to ensure retrofit activities support low-income households, and discuss options for funding activities going forward. Three of the Powering Up energy champions also attended this meeting, one of whom – Charlotte – had not previously engaged with energy issues prior to becoming an energy champion.

Off the back of this meeting, a motion was put forward and passed by Swindon Council, which states – *“The council pledges: To support the setting up of a Community Interest Company to promote energy efficiency and respond to fuel poverty in Swindon. This will be achieved by (but not exclusively): performing energy audits; providing advice, education, training and installation services; recruiting and training volunteers to meet the level of need”*. The project team worked with a Swindon Councillor to ensure the wording of the motion made specific reference to fuel poverty and the important role of energy advice and community volunteers. Energy champion Charlotte and another SCAN member are now working to set up the CIC.

In addition, recognising the importance to the energy champions of CSE's role in being a support and 'expert' organisation which they are affiliated with, the project team have secured the commitment of Swindon Council's Affordable Warmth Officer to act as an 'official' point of contact for the champions. The officer will be someone the champions can contact with questions and requests for support, and he will keep them updated on council activities that they can engage with (e.g. Warm Homes Discount events, activities relating to the Warm and Safe Wiltshire programme). Whilst this is beneficial for the champions, it also benefits the council with their statutory obligations relating to

² <https://cheeseproject.co.uk/>

affordable warmth and addressing fuel poverty (as clearly communicated by the Affordable Warmth Officer).

3.3. Learnings

Outlined below are the key learnings from the capacity building stage of the project.

3.3.1. Retention of volunteers

A key and ongoing struggle for the Powering Up team was, as noted previously, 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. Without a small group of committed volunteers it was then difficult for the project team to support and build capacity further. Some of the suggested reasons for this failure to retain volunteers is detailed below:

- **Residents who did engage were already active in the community**, and as a result often over-committed. As volunteer Iris notes: *"because a lot of us, we're volunteers and we're all busy, they're all busy doing their own whatever it is, our own thing...there's a lot of burnout with volunteers 'cause we're trying to do too much, so nobody could really take it on"*. Kate describes how she addressed this challenge by connecting between her different community roles: *"Just finding time to actually squeeze it in, I suppose, 'cause I do a whole bunch of other stuff and just making – switching priorities around or combining two things, so like I can do this while I'm at the café, so I can be street rep, energy ambassador and whatever else I need to be. They did marry up quite well because the stuff that we're doing as street reps, it's in the same community and it's for the same people, so it was easy enough to grab the same members of the public"*. Kate's approach is a good learning for the project – the project could have benefitted from further work to map existing community initiatives and hone in on key areas where priorities and activities overlap.
- **People have full lives**: in some cases this related to residents already being engaged with other initiatives, but in many cases residents' lives were already full with work, caring responsibilities (including childcare), and health issues. In many cases the project team experienced last-minute cancellations to community workshops, and residents who expressed high levels of interest but who were just unable to commit their time. The project team had anticipated this, allocating budget to cover volunteers' childcare and other similar costs; however, in practice, people were extremely reluctant to accept the offer to have such costs covered. Further exploration of how to financially support volunteers could have been beneficial for the project's ability to retain volunteers.
- **The energy disconnect**: this is already discussed in Chapter 2.
- **A clear programme of activities supports volunteer retention** – the relative success of the energy champions programme in retaining volunteers demonstrated the importance of having a clear and coherent programme of activities for residents to 'buy into' (this contrasts with the project team's initial open project framing and engagement approach, discussed in Chapter 2).

3.3.2. Shifting ownership from the project team to community members

The project team also experienced difficulty in shifting ownership of project activities from the project team to project volunteers. This is a difficulty experienced in all collective activities – as so clearly stated by project volunteer Kate: *“Getting volunteers is not hard, getting people to sit at the top of the tree and be boss is harder”*. Potential reasons for this difficulty in the Powering Up project are outlined below:

- **Lack of a stable project group:** shifting ownership from the project team to community members was very much exacerbated by the project’s failure to form a stable project group, which would have helped those who felt overwhelmed at the prospect of running events by themselves.
- **Project volunteers need an anchor:** Whilst not a unique problem to this project, it is clear that shifting responsibility can be complex, and in some cases it may just not be appropriate or viable – as resident Sean notes: *“That’s a big, big factor now into why I think a lot of these projects are failing because you can’t get volunteers, life is so busy people haven’t got the time to devote to them. Work alongside somebody, fantastic, but don’t expect them to take on the project in its entirety and just run with it, because 99 per cent of the time it will fail and this is what has happened before”*. Community-led activities, even once well developed, often need a local organisation or entity which they can be hooked on – even if just for occasional support, to have an ‘expert’ on hand, or to feel like they’re part of something bigger. This has been clearly demonstrated through the energy champions programme – whilst the project team has provided training to all the champions to build their capacity, and building on this champions have proactively done their own energy-related engagement and activities in their communities, CSE’s role as the overseeing organisation, and even also as ‘the expert’, has been critical to them. Acknowledging this for the energy champions going forward, the project team has secured the commitment of Swindon Council’s Affordable Warmth Officer as the champions’ key contact.

4. Reach of the programme & volunteer profiles

This chapter provides an overview of numbers reached, and combines this with 3 volunteer portraits to provide insight into some of the project journeys of residents who engaged with the project.

4.1. Reach of programme – in numbers

The Powering Up team estimates to have directly engaged with 658 people (105 in Hamp, 211 in Penhill, 342 in Duffryn) through a range of means, including via door-knocking, newsletter mailouts, attending training and other events. The depth of engagement will have varied. The indirect reach of events and training is likely to be greater, where those who attended in turn passed on tips and knowledge to their friends and neighbours.

The communities' Powering Up Facebook pages had 262 followers (44 in Hamp, 87 in Penhill, 131 in Duffryn). In some cases individual posts were liked by over 1,000 people. The Energy Champions Facebook page reached 85 followers, whilst posts on the site were viewed by 2,255 people.

4.2. Portraits of 3 project volunteers

Charlotte, a highly engaged energy champion in Swindon

Charlotte is retiree from a village to the south of Swindon. She joined the energy champion programme with a general interest in energy efficiency and climate change, and with a strong realisation that the Covid-19 pandemic was making life even harder for those who would already be struggling to heat their homes. Having not previously done any volunteering relating to energy, Charlotte became an energy champion because she wanted to support lower-income households make basic changes to improve their quality of life.

Charlotte was a highly engaged and motivated energy champion, attending all the meetings and trainings. From the beginning of the programme Charlotte undertook many self-led energy activities – including making Facebook posts with energy advice, putting up posters, and talking with food banks and local businesses.

The project team invited Charlotte to a meeting with Swindon Council's climate emergency buildings sub-group, as an energy champion representative. At this meeting Charlotte communicated the need for the energy champions to have a contact to support them after the end of the Powering Up project. In response, the council's Affordable Warmth Officer volunteered to take up this role, and support the champions going forward. As a result of attending this meeting Charlotte is also working with another Swindon resident who is engaged with retrofit to explore setting up a Community Interest Company which works on community-scale retrofit projects (which Swindon Council has now committed to supporting).

Kate, a highly engaged volunteer in Penhill

Kate, a local graduate in environmental science and lone parent of three, became one of the most active volunteers in Penhill. She was not in paid work due to carer responsibilities and already held several voluntary roles, being an active Street Rep, and running the Junior Reps. Through this, she co-organised litter picking events, and helped run the community café and youth rep activities.

Kate introduced the project team to local residents and environmental initiatives in Penhill and Swindon (including SCAN and Swindon Eco-Fest). Increasingly, she began to engage in activities and stayed in regular contact with the project team until eventually she helped run an energy information stall at Swindon Eco-Fest, which noticeably boosted her confidence.

General skills training opportunities were crucial in this development. For example, Kate benefitted from the Powering Up social media and energy advice training, and then increasingly took initiative and developed her own ideas. Her activities included providing energy information on the community Facebook group, facilitating the Penhill Youth Reps to make energy posters for the project, running an energy stall at a Big Lunch event, giving energy advice and helping residents sign up to the Warm Homes Discount at a weekly drop-in café, and supporting Swindon Council at a Warm Homes Discount event. She became known locally as the 'Energy Person' and people would approach her for advice. Her activities are likely to have increased energy awareness in the community and addressed issues of energy affordability.

However, her other responsibilities, such as volunteering and caring commitments – the latter of which hugely increased during Covid-19 school closures, meant that she was not always able to follow through on all of her ideas, or to recruit others as energy champions, or to run the drop-in energy café more frequently.

Kate also took up a voluntary position on the Tenant's Scrutiny Panel, which looks at various policies and procedures in housing, gathers evidence, makes recommendations, and reports back to council officers on findings. The panel is represented on the independent complaints panel and is the last tier of complaint procedures before the housing ombudsmen. The Powering Up team provided a reference for Kate's application to the position. She was very excited about this role because of the experience it would give her, helping her to build her CV for when she can return to work.

Joan Jay, a semi-engaged resident in Hamp

Joan is an older resident in Hamp, who first engaged with the Powering Up project when she attended one of the energy advice sessions in the Hamp Hub in October 2018. The project team noted her community-mindedness, energy-related knowledge and interest in community energy.

Joan attended the slow cooker event in the Hamp Hub in November 2018. She networked with other residents and was very interested in the project team's energy saving advice. She discussed a 'community resilience' event she had attended, and how principles could be applied to improving Hamp's resilience. Joan then attended the scoping workshop in April 2019, alongside 2 other residents. Joan was very enthusiastic in the session about community energy initiatives.

In June 2019, Joan did some research for the project team on the management of the Hamp Community Association (HCA) building – the project team knew that there was a new HCA building being planned and saw it as an opportunity to provide some energy advice and encourage the community to look at integrating renewable energy into the new build. Joan connected the project team to the HCA, and from there the team provided advice to the HCA members and supported them at meetings with contractors bidding for the building project.

Joan was the most consistently engaged resident in Hamp, attending all of the engagement and capacity building workshops that were delivered. However, Joan's engagement was clearly limited by the ill-health of her husband and her caring responsibilities, which, for example, restricted how long she could attend events for and her general capacity for engaging in self-led activities following the project team-delivered events.

5. Overarching learning

The project generated learning which will be useful for a variety of audiences, including community energy groups and other climate change activists seeking to engage with more deprived communities around issues of energy, climate change and social justice.

The broader economic context and public attitudes

The project has demonstrated the importance of the broader economic context and public attitudes as influences on the ability to gain traction in a community. During times of low public engagement on climate change it can be difficult to build enthusiasm, whilst austerity can mean that the capacity of local government and the voluntary sector is stretched. Wider public discussion and action can make it easier to connect. The youth climate strikes and Extinction Rebellion activity, which started in late 2018 and grew through 2019, brought renewed public awareness of climate change and interest in relevant local action. Accompanying this, the wave of Climate Emergency declarations that were passed at different political scales (74% of District, County, Unitary and Metropolitan Councils now having declared a Climate Emergency) established political commitments that community initiatives and campaigning could hook onto – clearly demonstrated by activities in Swindon. Projects need to be ready to capitalise on such opportunities, helping local people recognise the relevance to their own situation and what could be achieved locally.

For low income communities, particularly where most people rent, the current model of how energy is supplied to households means that it is difficult to develop community-owned renewable energy generation projects as a suitable model. Engaging people in campaigns such as The Power for the People campaign may be an important step towards creating new opportunities: the campaign is seeking to achieve policy change so that local energy generators can sell directly to local residents. If successful, this would make it more realistic to propose a community owned energy generation project in low-income communities as it would enable people to make direct savings on their energy bill.

Covid-19 pandemic

The pandemic had a significant impact on available options for delivery of project activities, making it impossible to conduct face to face meetings and activities during periods of national lockdown and regional tier restrictions. However, it also led to rapid mass adoption of online (mostly Zoom) meetings as a way of staying connected. The project was able to capitalise on this as a way to continue to run project activities, notably the Energy Champions events. Online meetings are likely to gain increased importance as a low cost part of the toolkit for future community activism. This is likely to make it easier for people with carer and domestic responsibilities to stay involved.

The local historical context

The local historical context is also an influential consideration. Projects need to undertake careful preparatory work to understand and identify strategies to respond to the challenges of engagement fatigue or the legacy of communities more used to being asked to engage in projects with activities and outcomes pre-decided by outsiders. This should be explicitly explored in early engagement. This

can also enable an early understanding of the existing social fabric of community activities already being undertaken on a voluntary basis by local people.

Balancing open-ended design with clear programme of action and community asks

The pursuit of an open-ended design without set ‘tangible’ outcomes for the community but with a focus around energy requires persistence, creativity and an agile, iterative approach to project planning. Whilst remaining committed to a co-designed approach, it is still important to develop a framework with a structured programme of engagement and an outline vision of what success might look like in reasonably tangible terms, whilst leaving scope for the detail to get ‘coloured in’ later. Setting SMART project objectives and defining clear ‘asks’ or ‘calls for action’ for the local community can help build a critical mass. These SMART objectives can then be revisited and revised with residents once a critical mass of interested volunteers has been achieved.

Clear programme of activities to support volunteer retention

The project demonstrated the value of capacity building activities for volunteers as a way to build their own confidence in their ability to support others. Planning and delivering a mix of different types of activities, including those suggested by community volunteers, can be really important to retain the enthusiasm and engagement of volunteers. It is important to remember that the social purpose of activities can be as important as the practical learning outcome, helping to motivate volunteers to continue to remain involved and making connections with others.

Provide opportunities for volunteers to develop transferable skills

For some volunteers, an important motivator for being involved is as a means to increase their employability. This can be particularly important where their carer responsibilities limit their current options to take up formal training or employment. Volunteers really valued learning new transferable skills. The associated improvement in self-confidence also helped. A key example is a volunteer who was appointed as a member of a local scrutiny panel after developing her skills and self-confidence.

Social media training and groups

Social media training and use of social media proved a popular and effective way to involve more people, including younger people. Training can help overcome existing digital divides and make it easier to promote awareness and maintain continuity even where in person events get cancelled or delayed. The Facebook pages for each community enabled the project to achieve a wider reach than those attending in-person events. It is important to consider which social media platforms are most appropriate for different purposes and for engaging with different age groups.

The value of informal voluntary networks

Informal voluntary networks, such as street reps, proved an effective way to bring several people on board at once. Such networks can help to ensure that individual volunteers are less likely to feel ‘alone’ and can share responsibility for planning and doing activities. Group training activities for network members can enable peer support.

Recognise the importance of community connectors

Community connectors are individuals who are already invested in taking action to help their community thrive and who are already known to other residents and identify as having shared interests and concerns with other residents. Community connectors are likely to be busy with other things so projects should avoid over-reliance on these individuals and persevere in actions to get more people involved. Having a community connector involved helps to build awareness of what is happening and make others feel more confident about coming forward to get involved.

Consider appointing community connectors to take on a paid role so that they can provide a regular presence to take local leadership in managing and delivering local activities. Connectors should ideally be recruited on basis of their interest, understanding and commitment to approach, their recognition within target areas as a 'trusted representative - one of us' as well as having appropriate skills. It is extremely difficult for such projects to take root and flourish in the community where they are managed by staff from an organisation that is not based in the community.

Make connections to create an enabling network to support community activity

The project demonstrated the value of putting effort into making connections not only with residents themselves but also with other support providers active in the area, particularly those with a similar or complementary remit, including council officers and housing officers. This can also include local action groups which may have a wider geographic scope. This can help to build connections with other local activities and organisations. An example of this is the link made at Penhill with the Swindon Climate Action Network and the local adult learning college, which in turn contributed to the Energy Champions activity

Share the learning – including what didn't work

Such projects are difficult and require an empirical (trial and error) approach. This means that the project may not progress as hoped and that what seemed like a good idea may not achieve the hoped-for outcomes. This is valuable learning for others trying to do similar things. It is important to share ongoing learnings, being honest and reflexive about what does and doesn't work. Sharing in this way can also yield constructive suggestions from others.

Be strategic in identifying who to share learning with

The project team spent time undertaking exploratory research to identify which other organisations would potentially be interested in learning from the Powering Up project, including practical resources but also to work together to think about how the lessons learned could be applied to future programmes. By contacting individuals and sharing early learnings, the team was invited to present at external seminars as well as to write guest blogs. Early engagement helped focus our efforts on those organisations (including local groups within larger affiliated networks) most interested in applying lessons to their own future initiatives.

6. Conclusions

This final chapter presents our conclusions on how far the project was successful in achieving its stated aims.

Improved local energy resilience.

Despite reaching relatively large numbers of people in each community, limited progress was achieved in Duffryn and Hamp, whilst small-scale meaningful improvements were achieved in Penhill, in the form of increased energy awareness, uptake of financial support and the establishment of a network of energy champions. The lack of success in achieving sustained engagement from residents in Duffryn and Hamp meant that, despite some degree of increased energy awareness in both communities, these changes are not considered to be sufficient to count as ‘meaningful improvements in energy resilience’.

Prospects for communities to build energy resilience without further intervention.

In Penhill, prospects are considered relatively good, with several activities at a point where others are ready to take these forward without needing to rely on further substantive input by CSE. The energy champions will continue to meet virtually via Zoom (and in person when possible), and will be supported by Swindon Council’s Affordable Warmth Officer. Energy awareness modules will be on ongoing offering in Swindon Council’s Adult Community Learning offering (where they were not previously). A Community Interest Company is being established to support community-level retrofit activities (with a focus on addressing fuel poverty), which will be supported by Swindon Council – the outcomes of this are unknown but they, at least, establish a foundation for future activities.

In Hamp and Duffryn the prospects are considered to have a low likelihood. The project discontinued activities in Duffryn in 2019 and in Hamp in 2020 due to a lack of community engagement: given the difficulties in achieving sustained engagement by a sufficient number of people, the team decided that there were limited prospects for overcoming the challenges encountered within the remaining timeframe for project delivery.

Findings are widely disseminated so that they influence the future practice of others across the UK and help to shape relevant national policies and programmes.

There has been some good progress in disseminating findings to influence the future activities in other communities, and by other community organisations (although stalled by the Covid-19 pandemic). Findings have been shared via published blogs, in webinars and at events, and in ongoing conversations with other organisations – including climate-focused community programmes (National Lottery’s Climate Action Fund), national networks (Friends of the Earth, ACRE, Transition), and local organisations. This is an ongoing component of the project (with supplementary funding from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust), and there are good prospects that ongoing engagement could result in the findings influencing the practices of other local, regional or national programmes.