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Prospering Together: Engaging Communities in the Energy Revolution.

Executive Summary

Prepared for Innovate UK

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The Climate Insights logo features the word 'CLIMATE' in a large, bold, white sans-serif font. A small green and yellow graphic element is positioned to the left of the 'I' in 'CLIMATE'. Below 'CLIMATE' is the word 'INSIGHTS' in a smaller, white sans-serif font.

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Executive Summary

This report explores some of the diverse ways in which engagement and communication has been undertaken across the 90+ projects in the Prospering from the Energy Revolution (Pfer) programme. It unpacks how over the past five years, participant acceptance of Smart Local Energy Systems (SLES) has been achieved and what lessons can be learned to take forward into future projects and programmes.

Our energy system is transforming, but people do not want to have things 'happen' to them, with decisions having already been made about where their energy will come from, or how it will be managed. Citizens have an effective veto on net zero delivery; imposing solutions won't work. This was so clearly demonstrated recently in Whitby, with the scrapping of a hydrogen village trial due to overwhelming local opposition.

Consent and active participation are critical to so much of the net zero transition, which will transform how we heat our homes, how we travel about, and when and how we use electricity. Our energy use will be managed in smarter and more integrated ways, for example, automating heating and car charging, to balance our grid and make best use of renewable energy. Trusting and consenting to these changes requires a clear understanding of the benefits, and what's important to people locally; what works in Manchester might not work in Rugeley. This is why early and ongoing engagement with communities is so important and why this report seeks to understand the lessons that can be learned from how Pfer worked with people in places.

Pfer has witnessed unprecedented changes to the UK political, social and energy landscape in the past five years since its inception - from the passage of the Climate Change Act through a pandemic, Brexit, a cost of living crisis and the invasion of Ukraine. It has seen four Prime Ministers in office, each with their own vision for the future energy system.

Enduring these challenges, Pfer has continued to explore how 'new, smarter, local energy approaches can deliver cleaner, cheaper energy services that would lead to more prosperous and resilient communities, and a more efficient energy system.'¹ Pfer's lessons from real-world implementation and evaluation of SLES will be important to ensure that place-based delivery of clean, smart and cheaper energy can be expanded across the UK. This report's findings highlight that engagement, when prioritised and given adequate resources, is fundamental to a successful outcome. This learning about engaging people in their places is perhaps as important to the future energy system as the technical and technological interventions will be in the long term, because people need to be invested in their future and the transformations that will take place in their homes, businesses and communities.

Detailed case studies and several examples of creative, expansive and innovative engagement are outlined in the report to demonstrate that building consent for and acceptance of SLES should be an important part of any project because it enables results to be more impactful and for communities to buy in to a cleaner, more resilient energy future.

¹ <https://apply-for-innovation-funding.service.gov.uk/competition/158/overview>



Lessons for future innovators and projects



Engage early - community and stakeholder engagement should be included in project plans from the outset.



Trusted intermediaries - Community energy organisations and local authorities played key roles in some PFER projects as the interface between the project and citizens; they are widely recognised as being more trusted than energy suppliers. Encouraging engagement and partnering with organisations that have ongoing interaction with communities in the bidding process for new funding is recommended.



Engagement takes time - engagement should be ongoing, ideally beyond the life of time-bound projects. Projects that had existing energy communities where citizens were already aware and engaged didn't need to do as much educational groundwork as those that didn't. It is important to keep people updated on progress, and provide opportunities to feedback.



Resource and skills - effective engagement needs to be adequately budgeted for, in terms of ensuring that the projects have both dedicated engagement staff with the right skills, and also resources to pay for stakeholder time and/or incentives.



Consent - not all participants will want to actively engage in projects, but it is crucial that all communities and individuals affected by changes to the energy system are given clear information and the opportunity to voice concerns. If the energy system is to benefit from full demand side flexibility, citizens will need to agree to having heavy loads in their households managed, which is only effective if automated. Householders need to maintain control but will ultimately be contracting with their supplier or a third-party aggregator who will manage non-time critical loads for them, for example, when their car is charged or water is heated.



Fairness and a just transition - Community energy organisations, the third sector and local authorities often act as 'the social conscience' in our energy system by highlighting the plight of those in fuel poverty and considering how to address social hardship caused by inadequate housing and the high cost of energy. This vital role needs to be recognised and resourced.



Early adopters - engaging with those individuals who are keen to become actively involved, learn more, or go first, can have important snowballing or peer-learning impacts across the wider project, encouraging the early majority to follow.



Space for creativity - try new things and look to different disciplines for inspiration. The third sector climate campaigning organisations are using much more innovative and creative engagement techniques than the energy sector, including arts and cultural initiatives to engage people and encourage diversity.



It's not all about energy - many stakeholders are values-driven and therefore energy-based information is an ineffective way to engage them. Most people care about where they live so engaging them in conversations about how their place could be better in future can be effective.



...but it's important to share the energy benefits - focusing on solutions for the immediate worries of households and emphasising the impact that SLES will have on consumers' bills have both been highlighted as important in building the appeal and public awareness and support for SLES. ²



Plan for things going wrong - thinking about what to do when things don't go to plan is essential. Suppliers may drop out, people may be unhappy with the pilot and project partners need to be ready to respond. People may have questions - what happens at the end of a trial, do the householders own the assets? Do they get removed? Being able to give clear answers is important.

² https://iuk.ktn-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PUBLIC-AWARENESS-AND-APPEAL-OF-SMART-LOCAL-ENERGY-SYSTEMS_FINAL.pdf

Lessons for funders/ programme designers



Cross-project learning - a collaborative approach to information exchange and feedback fosters a sense of camaraderie within a consortium and enables more informed decision making, streamlined processes, and greater efficiency. Cross project learning in future programmes would help accelerate the energy transition.



Enabling effective partnerships - bringing diverse stakeholders together in consortium can come with operational barriers. Enabling a better knowledge of how diverse stakeholders (e.g. local authorities) 'work' before the project commences, can enable more effective stakeholder engagement.



Feedback and results - finding ways of engaging stakeholders with the results, and sharing the findings of the projects as well as with the process is important. People have dedicated time and support to the process and sharing outcomes and lessons and acknowledging the role they have played is rewarding and may encourage further engagement beyond the project.

Effective engagement methods used across the Prospering from the Energy Revolution programme



Listen – Listening to what people care about and framing engagement around this can be more effective than presenting a solution. Knowing more about community interests and what resonates with particular people can help tailor information provision and the wider project design to maximise interest and engagement.



Explain simply - people need simple information in formats they use to ensure they understand technical information. Engaging people earlier in the process may enable the development of resources and materials that are even easier to understand.



Show me something - having something visual to enable discussion and understanding has had a positive impact on engagement across the programme.



One size doesn't fit all – use different formats to engage a diverse population. Digital engagement won't work for those not online, and events during the working day won't work for people at work etc.



Taking the time/having a cuppa - people are busy, but taking the time to meet with them and get to know them has been a successful strategy.



Meet you where you are - meeting in familiar surroundings enables engagement of diverse stakeholders in different areas of the project. Meeting people where they are also extends to understanding the diversity of the audience and tailoring approaches accordingly.



Dedicated social media/engagement resource - genuine and impactful two-way dialogues can be initiated via social media, but time and resources need to be dedicated to it so that it can be done effectively.

Other lessons



COVID-19 - a lot of plans needed changing due to the impact of the pandemic on outreach. But a positive knock-on effect was that this enabled more use of virtual tools, which in turn broadened the reach of the engagement in some projects. This engagement would not have been used in the same way otherwise, despite being available.



Engaging with the project team - engaging with stakeholders may not be seen as a priority by people in technical roles, and the approaches most successful for communities, may be incompatible with conventional ways of industrial or academic partners. Highlighting the successful outcomes of the PfER programme that were brought about by the user-centric methodologies could help overcome or remove similar future barriers.



Young people - Many projects realised the importance of engaging with young people after they had commenced and this element of dialogue had to be brought in subsequently. The next generation is key to the delivery of the energy system transformation; they need to understand and be inspired by the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Future projects should be developed with this element in the design phase as it may shape how the project is carried out.



Positive place-based visions for the future - people are inherently connected to where they are and can be mobilised around a positive vision for the future of where they live and work. SLES are a key part of realising places where we have cleaner air, healthier homes, more sustainable travel options. Place-based approaches enable people to have a say in the transformation of their communities.

It is evident that when engagement is given sufficient resources and thoughtful consideration, it significantly enhances the effectiveness of a project and participant acceptance of the energy system. By actively involving people in the places where projects are implemented, they can harness and develop a sense of belonging and ownership in shaping the collective future.

The Accelerating Net Zero Delivery report by PWC for PfER demonstrates that a place-based approach delivers double the energy savings and social benefits for a third of the cost, but critically this can lead to outcomes that are people really care about, including warmer healthier homes, cleaner greener jobs, lower energy bills and cleaner air.³ It's opportunities like these that need to form the basis of real participation in our energy transition going forward, if we are to create more prosperous and resilient communities, and a more efficient energy system.

We need the consent and trust of people and it is therefore crucial to ensure that stakeholders understand the technological advancements driving the projects and that they are included from the outset in the process of design and implementation. People's opinions and perspectives hold significant value; many aspire to be active participants in decision-making rather than passive recipients of predetermined outcomes - and they can help deliver better projects and impacts as a result.

³ <https://www.ukri.org/publications/accelerating-net-zero-delivery/>



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To explore all the learning from the Prospering from the Energy Revolution programme and its projects, see:

<https://iuk.ktn-uk.org/events/energy-smart-places-delivering-net-zero>