



Adrian Smith (far right) introduces the panel (from l to r) Patrick Allcorn (DECC); Damian Tow (Brighton Energy Co-op); Rufus Ford (Scottish and Southern Energy); Chris Church (The Low Carbon Communities Network); Rebecca Willis (Independent Researcher); Yvonne Rydin (University College, London).

## Community Energy: Taking stock, moving forwards?

**The CISE (Community Innovation for Sustainable Energy) project hosts an event to assess the impact of recent policy developments on the community energy sector.**

Community energy in the UK has grown considerably in recent years. There is now a wealth of practical experience, commitment, and continuing aspirations amongst local groups taking control of their production and use of sustainable energy. These developments continue to attract considerable interest, from energy agencies, local governments, sustainability networks, the media, policy-makers, energy companies, professional services providers, investors, and researchers.

Despite this interest, the context for community energy continues to shift, and, if anything, has become much more uncertain over the last year. Out-

side Scotland, grant funding has fallen away and become inconsistent. Sources of revenue such as the Renewable Heat Incentive are emerging, whilst the Feed-in-Tariff is subject to unhelpful proposals, and opportunities under the Green Deal remain unclear. Recent Local Energy Assessment Funds are welcome to those able to respond fast enough, but overall it is unclear how these policy developments advance community energy activity, where, and in what ways?

It is within this broad policy context, that the Community Innovation for Sustainable Energy (CISE) research project is examining how the UK community energy sector is innovating

and diffusing. At the halfway point in the CISE project, we have already found that the community energy sector is extremely dynamic and moving very fast. As a result, the panel discussion event '*Community Energy: taking stock, moving forwards?*', hosted at UEA London on March 8th 2012, provided a timely opportunity to take a step back and reflect on recent developments within UK community energy and on their longer-term implications.

Chaired by Professor Yvonne Rydin (Director of the UCL Environment Institute), a panel of 5 community energy experts were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- How have recent developments in national energy policy affected community energy initiatives?
- Have responses to these policy proposals galvanised and/or unsettled the community energy sector?
- What should be the key priorities looking ahead; who needs to be involved, and how?

**Chris Church** (Trustee of the Low Carbon Communities Network) kicked-off proceedings by arguing that a transformation is already underway as renewable energy is already seeing rapid growth and up-scaling. At the same time, however, he suggested that a battle was also ongoing as communities were having to fight for the right to generate, control and own their own energy.

**Rebecca Willis** (Green Alliance Associate and author of 'Co-operative Renewable Energy' for Co-Operatives UK) followed, quoting Dickens to suggest that these were the 'best of times' but also the 'worst of times' for community energy in the UK because, whilst community energy has never been more talked about or received more attention, policy in this area has also never been more complex or uncertain.

**Rufus Ford** (Policy Manager, Scottish and Southern Energy) continued the discussion by suggesting that large energy providers already recognise the value and potential contribution of community energy initiatives, but face a key challenge in developing sustainable business models that help develop the community energy sector whilst also providing a return on investment.

**Patrick Allcorn** (Decentralised Energy and Heat Team, DECC) went next, suggesting that despite a clear ministerial commitment to develop a policy structure that moves beyond pilot projects and allows all communities to develop successful energy projects, the community energy sector was still very diverse with no clear definition and no coherent voice. As such, he suggested, it was very difficult to grasp when trying to develop appropriate policy.

Finally, **Damian Tow** (Brighton Energy Co-op) provided a personal response to recent policy developments from his perspective as a practitioner seeking to develop a particu-

lar project. He highlighted the emotional challenges involved in developing community energy projects when the policy context keeps shifting so dramatically, suggesting that it can be extremely difficult and painful for projects just to keep going.

## How have recent developments in national energy policy affected community energy initiatives?

Drawing across all 5 panellists, responses to the three central questions were varied. With respect to how recent developments in national energy policy have affected community energy initiatives, the panellists' response was ambivalent. Whilst there was recognition that recent policy developments had, for example, provided a 'kickstart' to renewables and had significantly raised the profile of community energy groups, this optimism appeared to be offset by real concerns over the longer-term picture. In particular, there was concern that community energy was something of a 'squeezed middle' as energy policy was being developed only for large-scale energy providers or for individual householders, and was therefore failing to account for the specific challenges of community-scale delivery. At the same time, some panellists suggested that these challenges were well-recognised by both policy makers and large-scale energy providers, both of whom were already working hard to create a coherent and long-term structure within which community energy initiatives could flourish.

## Have responses to these policy proposals galvanised and/or unsettled the community energy sector?

Concerning whether or not policy developments had galvanised or unsettled the community energy sector, there was recognition that the community energy sector is extremely dynamic and diverse which often made it difficult for

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large-scale energy providers and policy makers either to receive clear messages from the sector or to develop appropriate and long-term frameworks for its development. At the same time, other panellists argued that existing policy was insufficiently ambitious with regard to how far community energy might be scaled-up. It was suggested that, within the existing energy market and policy domain, community energy was being seen as a small-scale 'soft and cuddly' sector and that, as a result, policies were being designed that failed to allow scope for significant and long-term expansion of the sector. Here, panellists suggested that the UK could learn important lessons from Germany where community wind, for example, is a major sector contributing almost 10% of Germany's electricity.

**What should be the key priorities looking ahead; who needs to be involved, and how?**

Finally, with respect to the key policy priorities for the community energy sector and who needs to be involved, there was a surprising amount of agreement between the otherwise often divided panellists. For community energy practitioners, the challenge appeared to be one of developing clear evidence of the value of community energy projects – both in terms of their



potential contribution to the future energy mix, but also in terms of the wider benefits initiatives can have within their communities. This, panellists argued, needed to be accompanied by strong leadership within the community energy sector to ensure it could have a strong voice within policy debates.

For policy makers, key priorities involved continuing to support the community energy sector not only financially, but also with respect to mobilisation and engagement in key policy discussions. At the same time, the message from the panellists was very clear that future policy for community energy needs to be transparent, clear, equitable and stable in the longer-term.

Regarding who should be involved, panellists appeared agreed that none of the current major players could or should be excluded. Instead, they called for the development of strong partnerships between community energy groups, large-scale energy providers and commercial developers, local authorities and central government and its agen-

cies, based around the central recognition that a successful community energy sector would work for the benefit of the whole of society and not just for the few.

**This briefing was prepared by Tom Hargreaves.**  
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