



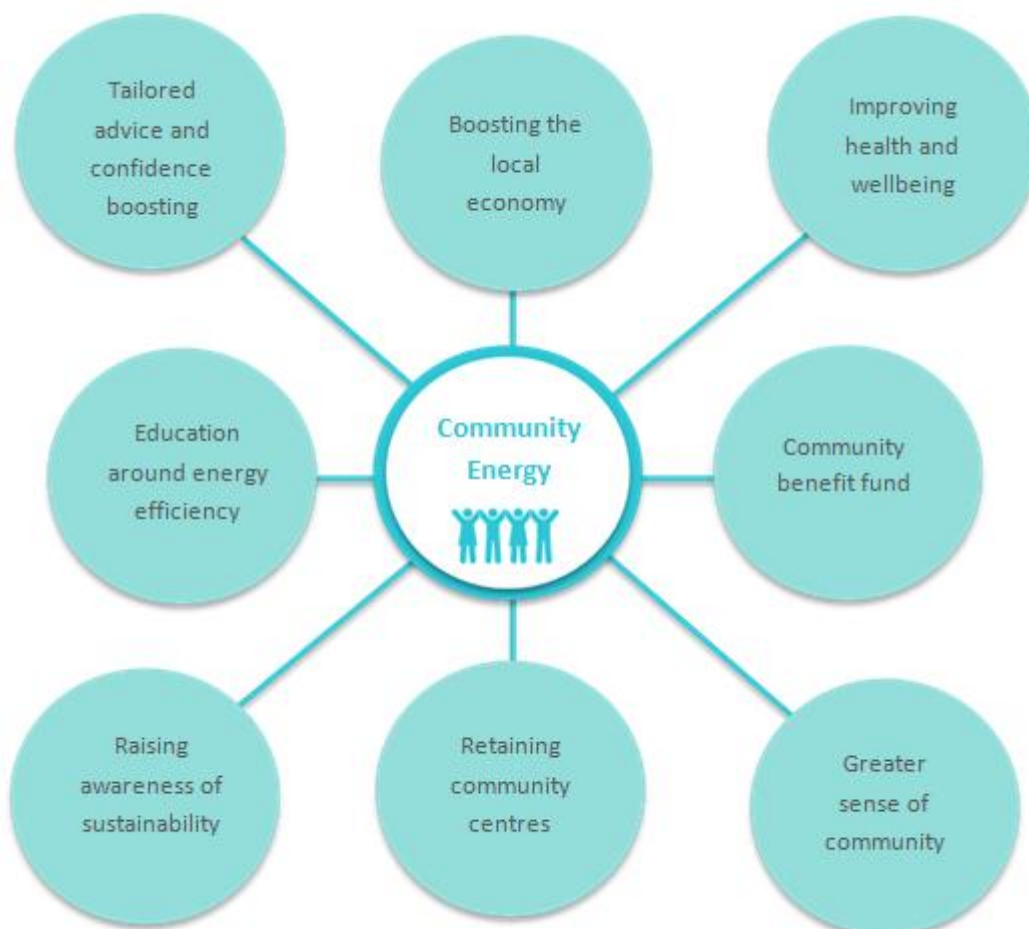
## Executive summary

In order to understand the social return on investment for the Community Energy seed fund, Northern Powergrid commissioned Explain to conduct in-depth interviews with the groups that shared in the fund in 2015.

## Results

Of the eight Community Energy groups included in this research, the majority were involved in smaller scale projects. Most groups engaged were either working on projects to conduct energy audits on key community buildings or install low-carbon technology on these buildings, such as solar PV. One group was also creating an oil co-operative to provide more affordable fuel in their area.

Put simply, such plans were the key focus for community groups in terms of outcome, however it was clear that each project had already realised or intended to realise much wider ranging impacts across the community which included the benefits shown in the following graphic:



When asked about the impact of the seed fund for their community group in the main, simply getting projects off the ground was the biggest benefit with three groups in particular noting that the project would not have been possible without the injection of funds. For one group the seed fund provided the ability to expand a pre-tested framework to a larger geographic area and for another group, the fund offered an ability to test the water for longer term plans to provide energy audits for the wider community. In addition, funding had helped to pay for specialist group members to ensure that they could play a major part in initiatives and also broadened the experience of Community Energy groups allowing them to play a greater part in other organisations and grown their network within the sector.

Suggested ways that Northern Powergrid could further contribute to the Community Energy sector other than the seed fund included:

- Offering discounted connection charges for Community Energy schemes
- Providing development workers to assist Community Energy groups to assist them with the technical elements of connection
- Ensuring that the seed fund is equality driven to assist those with an ethnic minority or learning disabilities for example
- Improving the speed of response when embarking on the connection process

## Recommendations

In the main, respondents identified a variety of social benefits resulting from their Community Energy projects:

- Use this research as evidence to back the importance of supporting the development of Community Energy, by drawing upon its social return on investment. Offering a seed fund for Community Energy groups is particularly impactful.

Hosting Community Energy conferences was very well received by all respondents who had positive networking experiences and were reassured by the vibrancy of the sector in their region:

- Investigate the value of providing more Community Energy conferences in the future or other ways to create and sustain networking streams for groups in the region

In addition to offering the Community Energy seed fund, respondents suggested that a greater focus around the costs and technicalities of connection were important going forward:

- Work to understand whether it would be financially viable to offer reduced network connections for renewables
- Investigate the potential to offer technical assistance when planning connections to help community groups overcome this barrier

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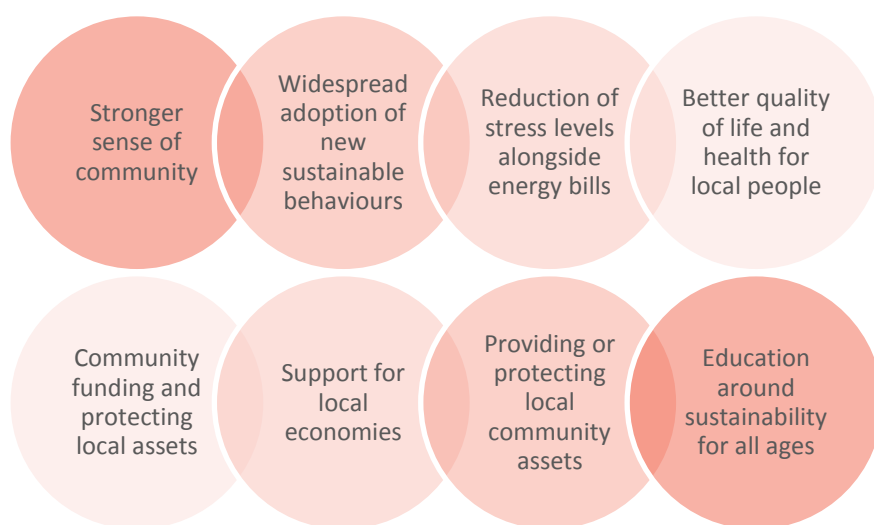
## 1.0 Introduction

The project background and methodology can be found in this section.



## Project background

The social return on Community Energy projects is something that has become increasingly talked about. Organisations such as Community Energy England<sup>1</sup> and Nesta<sup>2</sup> have begun to explore the direct and indirect additional social value that Community initiatives can provide, which can in some cases strengthen local capabilities beyond the energy project itself. There a number of ways that Community Energy projects can generate benefits beyond their original scope with many projects experiencing many of the below outcomes and more depending on the type of initiative.



There are an estimated 5000 Community Energy projects in the UK, of which 59% are urban and 41% rural and such projects are invaluable to promote sustainable living and carbon reduction in the UK. New thinking suggests that the community involvement in energy projects will prove to be far more cost effective than any national campaign to promote the same values given that messages from a trusted source are far more likely to produce results. In line with this theory, the provision of funding for local groups will prove to be invaluable due to the financial stumbling block many groups experience trying to get projects past even initial feasibility stages. The current climate also reinforces the importance of private funding when taking into account government cuts to schemes such as tax-

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<sup>1</sup> "Community Energy: Generating More than Renewable Energy" by Quantum for Community Energy England, October 2015. Available from: <http://communityenergyengland.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/CEE-Survey-2015.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "Local energy in an age of austerity: preserving the value of local and community energy" by Nesta, December 2015. Available from: <http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/local-energy-age-austerity-preserving-value-local-and-community-energy#sthash.bql7qjfl.dpuf>

relief and feed-in tariffs creating an uncertain future for Community Energy groups across the country.

In their business plan Northern Powergrid made a commitment to support local Community Energy groups in the provision of low carbon technology in their localities. A key aspect of this support is a £50,000 seed fund which is offered on an annual basis for Community Energy groups with the aim of helping to get Community Energy projects off the ground. The latest seed fund was offered around 12 months ago and so given that successful groups who shared in the fund would be well underway in their plans, research was required to understand more about the social impact such schemes have made to local areas. Identifying the social return on investment was also important to allow Northern Powergrid to evidence the provision of the seed fund in the coming years.

## Methodology

Given the exploitative nature of the research to understand the deeper social impact of Community Energy projects a qualitative approach was utilised, more specially a series of in-depth interviews. This allowed us to provide a depth of insight from respondents whilst being fully accessible for those who were time poor.

A database was provided by Northern Powergrid containing key contacts for each of the ten community groups who shared in the seed fund and these respondents were recruited by Explain to take part in an interview following an introductory letter from Northern Powergrid. Each interview was conducted by an experienced Explain researcher and audio recorded to be used as the basis of thematic analysis.

Of the ten Community Energy groups which shared in the seed fund, in total eight in-depth interviews were completed with the following groups:

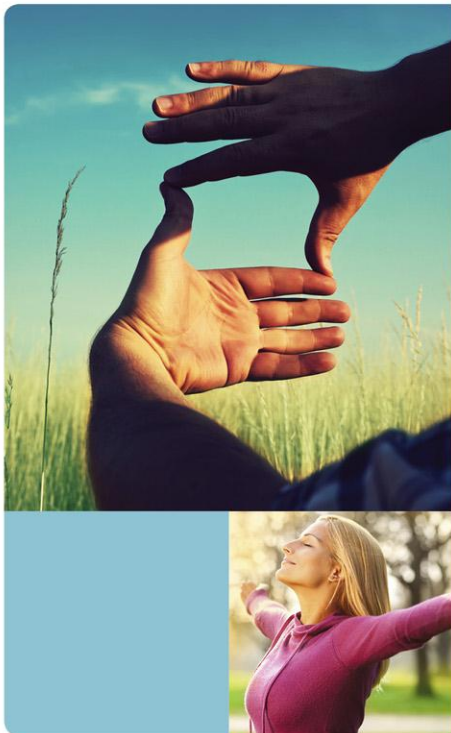
- Greening Wingrove Community Interest Co-operative Company
- North Tyneside Friends of the Earth
- Yorkshire Energy Doctor C.I.C.
- International Community Organisation of Sunderland
- Pennine Community Power
- Humber and Wolds Rural Community Council (HWRCC)
- WEA Green Branch
- Northern Community Power



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## 2.0 Results




Full results from the in-depth interviews can be found in this section.





## Community groups

Of the eight Community Energy groups included in this research, the majority were involved in smaller scale projects. Most groups engaged were either working on projects to conduct energy audits on key community buildings or install LCT on these buildings, such as solar PV. One group was also creating an oil co-operative to provide more affordable fuel in their area. Put simply, such plans were the key focus for community groups in terms of outcome, however it was clear that each project had already realised or intended to realise much wider ranging impacts across the community.




Within all of the interviews conducted, there was a definite element of uncertainty given the current climate of government cuts and all respondents were nervous about what the future held for current and future projects. What came across strongly throughout the interviews was the importance of both community groups supporting one another and effective networking with external organisations, such as local authorities, to ensure that projects had the best chance of survival and this was a key component for the majority of groups. Interactions with Community Energy England, National Energy Action and North East Community Energy were especially noted by respondents in addition to local authorities and rural community councils.

-  *"We have been networking and engaging for quite a long time with the local authorities in the East End, so Newcastle Council and North Tyneside Council. We're also a member of Community Energy England. We've been to a few meetings and outlined what we do with the North Tyneside Green Partnership, which came out of the LEP. We try to network with as many people as possible"*
-  *"We draw on the knowledge and the information that's been gathered by Community Energy England as a member of them. We've been part of ongoing discussions at the two conferences that Northern Powergrid have run on Community Energy. So we've took part in the discussions and networked with other groups at those sorts of things"*
-  *"We are a member of various networks. One is called Community Energy England. They send out a regular newsletter to all the members but they're also very good if you have a query and you ask them for help, they are often able to point you in the right direction"*

In order to network and build relationships with other community groups, respondents had attended the Community Energy events hosted by Northern Powergrid. Respondents commented on the positive nature of sessions to re-energise them in what can often seem a small sector and also connect them to other groups within their own region. One respondent also noted that finding other projects specialising in smaller initiatives could be challenging and that when referring to 'Community Energy' many groups were more likely to specialise in energy generation and renewables.

-  *"It was amazing how many people were there. It energises you because you realise that there's a lot of people out there trying to do things. Although you might know some of them in your sort of specific area, in the broader region it's quite difficult to know who all these people are. In fact it's probably unrealistic to even be aware of them until you've done something like a conference where it brings everybody together. So just from the point of view of spending a day in a room with almost a hundred other people representing groups trying to do similar things, that revitalises you and re-energises you"*
-  *"I think that Community Energy is a funny term. I think a lot of people when they think of that, think of wind turbines, and more renewable type things. So I hadn't found a huge number of examples of groups that were trying to do the more switching and energy saving type projects. I've seen a lot of examples of renewable type initiatives, but not so many on this"*

Bringing in partner organisations to assist on different elements of the project was important for respondents and groups were partnered, for example, with a range of councils, technology centres and local companies specialising in renewable power. Ensuring that partners were local was both important in a practical sense but groups were also keen to invest in their local communities wherever possible.

-  *"We entered into a partnership with Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council and the Alternative Technology Centre"*
-  *"Everything is done through our partner organisations. So it's through people, like Horton Housing, who provide extra services for vulnerable people, particularly those who are more rurally isolated. Another organisation that supports people with disabilities. We go through all different organisations really. Then that's central and that's Selby Association Voluntary Service who have contacts with a lot of the community groups"*
-  *"We did quite a lot of work with NAREC who are based in Blyth"*

- *"Yes, we're partnered initially with a small solar panel installer in South Shields, Advanced Renewable Power Limited, and they were really keen. So they would be able to do all the detailed assessments and have all the discussions with Northern Powergrid, who obviously are crucial to get the power back into the grid from the solar panels"*

In terms of the groups themselves there was a wide range of membership size but most had a team of six to ten directors to lead projects, each with a different skill set to bring to the project including entrepreneurs, researchers, engineers etc. Those that were most active in the day to day running of the projects were most likely to be retired given the required investment of time and one respondent noted the difficulties getting younger groups of directors together due to their hectic work life.

- *"We've got one person who describes themselves as a social entrepreneur. My own interest, and one of the other board members, comes more from academia. We're both researchers in academia, who are interested in the low carbon transition more broadly. There's an engineer whose background is in engineering education. Also there's somebody with a background in forestry, and also one of the first Community Energy projects"*
- *"Most of our directors have got a PhD that is beneficial to us and we have had help from lawyers"*
- *"It's the retired people that have the time in the day to have the meetings, that's the trouble. We have real difficulty with our directors meeting. I think that's partly why they haven't engaged about the energy, because most of them work"*

One group in particular recognised the importance of having a varied skill set for Community Energy projects and worked with a masters student at Newcastle University to drive forward the project using their expertise. This respondent noted that without their technical knowledge and understanding the project would have been very challenging and emphasised the importance of Community Energy groups having access to someone with the expert skills needed for their particular initiative.

□ *"We had Laura guiding us through, which was really helpful. I think having an expert. One of my bits of learning on this is having an expert working with you is just so essential because we're all a bit ignorant. She's been such an amazing guide through both funding, how to do things, as well as the technical thing of finding out the facts and figures, and doing the study. But she's also full of ideas. Just having a knowledgeable expert is brilliant. It's really important"*

For each project, community buy-in was also important to get projects off the ground, especially as many of the projects included in the research aimed to educate the area about sustainability and encourage residents to replicate initiatives in their own home and sign up for energy audits for example. Groups utilised a number of methods to raise awareness of their initiatives within localities and demonstrate the benefits of getting involved, in addition to setting up communication streams to share questions or concerns. Community engagement methods included the following:






## Social benefits

Throughout the in-depth interviews, respondents discussed both the direct and indirect social benefits resulting from their projects for the local community. Social benefits were wide ranging and those identified in the research are listed below with many groups demonstrating multiple impacts through their various initiatives.



### Boosting the local economy


Three groups stated that they actively utilised local companies wherever possible to give back to the community and boost the local economy. This was a key consideration for the oil co-operative who took the decision to avoid paying into national membership to ensure that the project was all about local suppliers and people. Some groups had also specifically used much of the Northern Powergrid seed fund to pay for either member or partner time to conduct energy audits within their own locality.


-  *"Where possible, we prefer to use local expertise"*
-  *"Some of them actually pay into a national membership, and we considered that as one of the ways to go forward with ours. But we actually decided that we wanted to keep as much of it local, it's mainly around economic development really, to keep as much of it about local suppliers, and local people "*
-  *"The audit - that got spent on local businesses, all of it did actually. On local freelancers working in community energy"*



## Creating a community benefit fund

Two Community Energy groups had longer term plans for their project to not only to try and implement the use of low-carbon technologies (LCTs) in their community for example, but also to accumulate a community fund or income for the group for the future. Their key aim was to generate enough funding to run further projects in their locality so that they were building for a self sufficient future without relying solely on grants.


 *"This is very much what a Community Energy co-op is about. In other words, it's not a question of just raising money to pay for the solar panels. It's also raising a little bit more than is required purely for the panels so that you have got a community pot. So this is a constant refurbishment of the community pot of money to enable further projects to be developed"*



 *"It was partly to get an income for the CIC. We've got to explore all ways in which we can keep this local environmental enterprise group going in the long run. At the moment, we're very dependent on grants and we don't want to be grant dependent. So we were exploring ways in which we could earn an income"*



## Educating the community

Education around sustainability and energy efficiency was a key impact for many of the groups engaged in the research with many trying and succeeding to share learnings with the wider community. Ensuring that this was open to all ages was important, with two groups in particular working to link their projects with school curriculums to educate the next generation, especially if their scheme involved improving school buildings. One group shared learnings about energy efficiency firstly with children in school and then went out to their parents to understand how much money local households would save by using energy saving ideas.



 *"We had hoped it became an educational thing because with all the Greening Wingrove projects and initiatives there's been a huge community learning attached to it. We thought that if we had PV on roofs, and interested people in all the different community organisations about what we were doing, and the fact that we were getting energy and how it all worked, it would be cascading the learning"*

-  *"What we've been discussing with the teachers is that actually you can do a lot of exercises around those solar panels. We were going to buy them some models where they could play with them in the classroom. So that would be a more long term benefit obviously to educate the next generation"*
-  *"We have got school schemes, we work with schools looking at how much energy costs and ways that they can actually save energy. They then go out to their families and to the community and they talk to the local corner shop, or whoever. They do a baseline measurement of what their energy costs and then we get them to do a switch off fortnight and find out if they've implemented all their energy saving ideas. Then what have they actually saved at the end and what could the community have saved. So it all fits into one really"*



## Tailored recommendations for change

For two groups focusing on conducting energy audits in the local area, a key benefit was around providing free and practical advice for local residents as to how they could change their behaviour in order to save money and provide a better quality of life. The recommendations from the results of the energy audit provided advice around making changes to buildings themselves and the results of the audit then provided the evidence needed for further funding, for example to replace windows or have gas central heating installed.





-  *"I would say that from the point of the view of the community centre that got the energy audit, they've now got a document that outlines the energy performance of the building and the users. It provides a range of recommendations for them. Some of them are very low and no cost around changing behaviour and some very simple changes they can make to the building"*
-  *"I think one benefit was firstly helping with the energy audit. So then I know, certainly in Cridling Stubbs, they then used that and managed to get funding to replace their windows and to have central heating installed"*





## Improving health and wellbeing




An outcome for many of the projects included in this research was to ultimately improve the health and wellbeing of those involved. This could be through lowering their energy bills and by doing so also lowering their stress levels or by providing a better quality of life by insulating their homes etc. One group in particular also offered a more holistic service when dealing with new members who signed up to the oil co-operative. In initial conversations this group aimed to gain an understanding of how members were coping financially which enabled them to signpost them to organisations that could offer additional help as well as sharing simple energy saving information that could help them save money.

-  *"Obviously in some cases we also have people who are quite vulnerable as well. So in some cases they've managed to save more money, which means they have more savings. This is also something they can use to survive. I think that's quite important. We haven't measured that and I think that's a problem. But in terms of indirect benefits, there's definitely been health and wellbeing, and an emotional benefit as well for the people who managed to solve the problems with the energy providers, because with some of them it was stressful"*
-  *"Absolutely, you get better lighting and less worry about bills, etc"*
-  *"I think the other thing we're able to do is pick up some of the other wider issues of people. So we may pick up that there's some welfare benefits issues for people, particularly in the initial conversations. Are they feeling unable to actually pay for their fuel? So we have an agreement with the credit union to be able to help people to set money aside for fuel. People's housing as well, we'll talk to them about insulation, energy saving light bulbs and all sorts of things. Just once you get talking to people, you can find that little bit more about how they live. Then it's more like a holistic assessment of their situation"*
-  *"I guess the other benefit, which is for the individual householders in terms of making their energy bills a bit more affordable and hopefully making them feel warmer over the winter"*



## Instilled sense of community

Another outcome of Community Energy projects was bringing those in a certain locality together and encouraging people to get to know their neighbours for a greater sense of community support. This was apparent for projects in both urban and rural areas but felt to be particularly important for isolated rural communities and not only encouraged people to build bonds with others in their locality, but also increased the uptake of local buildings and facilities for organised activities to bring people together.

-  *"We are obviously a rural area, we're not in a city, we're a small village and you get to know your neighbours better by doing these kinds of projects together. Sometimes it develops into new friendships which is always useful. Also you get to know who has got which skills. So it's not just about the energy scheme but you find out that someone has got these skills, and therefore you can go back to them in the future and say 'could you help me with this one here?'. So it's much more openness between neighbours"*
-  *"I think there's only about eighty five households in the village and there aren't any other local facilities there. I know that they have a dining club once a month now which is really well attended. I think they've got themselves a license, not a pub, but where they can serve drinks the odd evening a week. I think that's the real thing for those really isolated communities; having a community central hub where people know that things are going on. I think projects like this will hopefully add to the sense that things are going on in that village"*
-  *"It gave an opportunity for people in Sunderland to come together and work together and hear what each other were doing on this issue. So again, it's like a chance to actually talk about it"*



## Raising awareness of sustainability




Many of the Community Energy groups engaged felt that their projects would go a long way in raising awareness on the topic of sustainability in their community and broaden people's thinking in the role that they could play both in the wider locality and their own homes. Respondents aimed to create a real buzz around energy efficiency with the added guidance of how local residents could replicate initiatives. Various methods were used to engage with people in the immediate locality and also get the message out to a wider audience through local press coverage and the positioning of LCT installations themselves to get noticed.

- *"The broader point that we were trying to do was raise awareness for the potential for Community Energy in the broader sense. So not just around energy efficiency in specific buildings, but for groups of individuals based around community centres, and their user groups and neighbours, to become more engaged with the idea of Community Energy. So that they could become more involved in bigger projects"*
- *"The idea is that we will basically encourage people to look at renewable energy for their own households as well"*
- *"I think the actual benefits are more to do with raising awareness and actually encouraging people to do something new around energy. There's always the question of how much awareness raising translates into action and behaviour change, but it usually translates into something because those people start thinking about their day to day behaviours"*
- *"We used the local press a lot. We have a weekly newspaper for our community that most people read, and it's quite easy to get articles in there"*
- *"It must have a footfall of about a thousand people a week. It's huge. So getting panels on the roofs there, the publicity that will generate will just be massive. That's publicity for the whole concept of Community Energy and co-operative Community Energy. So I think that model, we're going to get a lot of people knocking on our doors and saying, 'yeah, we'd like to come on board', be it schools, be it other community groups"*



## Instilling confidence

As many of the projects aimed to encourage local residents about how they could replicate schemes in their own homes or pass on knowledge a large part of the process was creating an environment which would instil confidence in local people, either to act themselves or pass on the message to others. Respondents found that the confidence local residents needed to try initiatives in their own homes was often most likely to be provided in a group environment where people could share the experience and discuss any progress or challenges. As a result, this then fed into other community benefits such as an increased sense of community etc.

-  *"It gives them the confidence to talk to their user groups and talk to some of the residents. Often in these places where it's very low income areas with a lot of fuel poverty, a lot of people come in to use the community centre and just come for some help and advice. A lot of these people are really struggling day to day, whether to put the heating on or buy food for the day. So even just doing the project like we did it gives the staff and the volunteers at the community centre the confidence and access to other information, and raises their awareness of where other information is, so they can then help those people"*
-  *"One of the schemes we have already done is getting a group of households to install thermal solar panels for hot water. The process of those ten households meeting up regularly to discuss progress and what to do next. The people felt that actually the group was supporting each other. Sometimes it's a bit scary for an individual, or for one household, 'should I do that, or shouldn't I do it?' Whereas if you are part of a bigger group that does it together, it gives a bit of confidence to the group, that 'yes, I haven't thought about that but thank you for raising it because that's useful'"*
-  *"It gives the community a feeling that yes, we can do things if we do it together"*



## Retaining community centres

For those projects that aimed to utilise local community centres for the installation of LCT or energy audits for example a key aim was to ensure that such local buildings were protected. Respondents noted that due to council cuts community centres were largely underfunded, under used and in danger of being abandoned completely. By ensuring that such buildings were easier to heat, better insulated and had a real purpose, many groups were trying to guarantee their future and reinstate them as the hub of the community. In addition, the money saved on heating and lighting etc could then be used to fund additional community facilities and events.




-  *"For a lot of them, particularly in Newcastle, not so much North Tyneside, they're just used to the council doing everything for them. That's all stopped now with asset transfer and with all the cuts, the councils are getting rid of all their community centres. So if the volunteers, and the management committees can't take them on themselves, and they don't have a viable business plan, then those community centres are going to be lost. In low income areas, these community centres are often vital lifelines for a lot of people. So by making them more energy efficient, by hopefully providing new income streams for them through renewables, we're hopefully going to play some part in ensuring that the community centres long term are sustainable and viable"*
-  *"They can now really try and get that building back into use again. When I first visited, it was really, really cold and I don't think the local community were using it that much. So I think having that building running, and the community itself is really isolated. It's not near any big towns or anything. So having that community focus for that building has been really good for them"*
-  *"In terms of this community building, it's a fairly old building, so it is a pretty costly building to heat, to light, so anything that we can do to actually reduce the cost means that they can refurbish them in a much more sensible way"*
-  *"The community building itself, and therefore instead of having to spend money on huge electricity bills, they'll be able to get other facilities that the community wants"*
-  *"That will now be saving them money. So if it's saving them money, that's freeing up money for other things the community centre can do. So that's very specific short term benefits to the community centre"*

In terms of why such social benefits were important for particular areas, respondents suggested the following reasons:



- **Urban areas** - Respondents noted that facilitating renewable technology was often more challenging in urban areas therefore community groups needed to think more innovatively to overcome issues and boost urban sustainable energy
- **Deprived areas** - For two groups the higher levels of deprivation in urban areas was a key reason for their projects to tackle fuel poverty, allowing local residents to save on their energy bills and improve their quality of life
- **Off-gas rural isolated areas** - Two groups ran projects to ease the expense of more rural communities which weren't connected to the gas network. In this way, providing cheaper oil supplies and energy saving advice was crucial to reduce bills and improve overall health and wellbeing
- **Areas lacking Community Energy** - Groups based in the North East noted that their Community Energy schemes were important due to the lack of current initiatives. One group in Sunderland noted the lack of current work around energy efficiency in the area and another commented on the lack of Community Energy cooperatives in the North East

## Seed fund

All respondents were asked about the impact of the seed fund for their community group and in the main, simply getting projects off the ground was the biggest benefit with three groups in particular noting that the project would not have been possible without the injection of funds. For one group the seed fund provided the ability to expand a pre-tested framework to a larger geographic area and for another group, the fund offered an ability to test the water for longer term plans to provide energy audits for the wider community.




-  *"The project wouldn't have happened without it. We wouldn't have done any energy projects in those two communities without it. So I think it's obviously had the impact of helping raise awareness so people can do things to try and reduce their bills"*
-  *"We wouldn't have been able to do it at all in North Lincolnshire without it. So the fact that we've been able to actually start the scheme and promote it, not only promote that but also promote some of the other things we do, like around energy saving. So that has been the main thing. I think the other thing is it's helped us to raise the profile with the council as well"*
-  *"We had a lot of minority clients who have the same problems, but they lived in other wards, so in terms of anything to do with energy advice or energy efficiency, we couldn't actually work with them. Thanks to Northern Powergrid funding through the Community Foundation, we were able to extend that and also look a bit at energy generation and energy efficiency, not just as individuals, but actually working with maybe groups of people to raise awareness of how this can be done"*

In addition to this, funding had helped to pay for specialist group members to ensure that they could play a major part in initiatives and also broadened the experience of Community Energy groups. This was particularly evident of groups in their infancy allowing them to play a greater part in other organisations and grown their network within the sector.

-  *"Paying local freelancers helps to support them in the voluntary work they do alongside their work. In this field there is usually some voluntary work that has to be done alongside paid work to make things happen"*
-  *"I suppose it's given us more impetus to be involved in NECE, the North East Community Energy project because we've been running this pilot scheme. It gives us a bit more"*

*experience to be sitting at the table there. It's just helped us develop really, because the more projects we run the more people get to know about us"*

In terms of longer-term benefits some groups were also looking to expand their projects in the future based on successful pilot schemes. This included expanding their projects to cover a wider geographic area and also moving towards bigger schemes such as electricity generation. One respondent also felt that a longer term advantage of the funding would be passing on the experience and learnings to other Community Energy groups in the North East.

-  *"Longer term, we've always hoped that through the community building approach, by raising awareness, by bringing some short and medium term benefits immediately, this would lead to much more networking with the community centres. Then look at the potential of community centres to be involved in bigger projects. At the moment we're looking at the feasibility of solar. But larger scale, not community centre scale"*
-  *"If we can follow up, like we're hoping to do in the East Riding to offer an LPG cooperative as well. We have also talked about the biomass pellets. So we're looking at the whole range. We're trying to work out whether there is a recycling opportunity really, and if there is a by-product from some of the schemes that we've looked at that actually we can turn into fuel for people"*
-  *"I'd be more than happy to talk to other people in other parts of the North East about what we've done and get them to develop a similar model, or a model appropriate to their environments. So I think it's going to have all sorts of benefits in the longer term"*



Finally, respondents were asked whether there was anything else Northern Powergrid could bring to the Community Energy sector other than the seed fund and the following suggestions were made:

- Offering discounted connection charges for Community Energy schemes
- Providing development workers to assist Community Energy groups to assist them with the technical elements of connection
- Ensuring that the seed fund is equality driven to assist those with an ethnic minority or learning disabilities for example
- Improving the speed of response when embarking on the connection process

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### 3.0 Conclusions and recommendations

Our key conclusions and recommendations from the results of the research.



## Key conclusions

Overall this research demonstrates that the impact of the seed fund on Community Energy groups was incredibly positive and wide reaching in terms of the impact that funded projects had on their local communities. Whether the results of the projects had been fully realised yet or not, each Community Energy group engaged in the research had a clear plan of the ways that their projects would improve their local area and the indirect social impact could often span much further than originally planned. All projects centered around energy efficiency, providing audits and installing LCT within communities and other than saving energy, reducing energy bills and raising awareness about energy efficiency there were a large number of additional social benefits identified as a direct result of these initiatives. Such social benefits ranged from protecting community buildings and creating funds for local facilities to educating local school children about the values of sustainability and improving the health and wellbeing of their families. In this respect, the social benefits of projects included all ages and sections of the community.

The provision of the seed fund had been instrumental for community groups to get their projects off the ground, pilot their projects for future expansion and engage with a greater number of people in their locality. Many of the groups engaged in the research also had much bigger plans for the future to expand their projects either geographically or technically and so the seed fund helped to offer them a starting point to a much longer-term vision. What was very apparent in all interviews was the importance of networking and drawing upon other groups' experience and advice during initial project stages and so the Northern Powergrid Community Energy conferences were very positively received. Respondents noted that the opportunity to make regional contacts was invaluable and also found the experience revitalising and reassuring in the way that it demonstrated the size, diversity and passion within the Community Energy sector in the North East.

Respondents were happy with the application process for the seed fund finding this straight forward and in terms of any additional help that Northern Powergrid could provide to the sector going forward suggestions centered around connections. The cost of connection and technical expertise needed during the process were felt to be particular barriers and respondents suggested that offering discounts to community groups to connect renewables to the network would be useful. Providing a technical helping hand in this developmental stage was also felt to be helpful for those community groups that did not have access to an all important 'expert'. Ensuring a timely response from Northern Powergrid during this process was also highlighted as an area for improvement going forward.

## Recommendations

In the main, respondents identified a variety of social benefits resulting from their Community Energy projects:

Use this research as evidence to back the importance of supporting the development of Community Energy, by drawing upon its social return on investment. Offering a seed fund for Community Energy groups is particularly impactful

Hosting Community Energy conferences was very well received by all respondents who had positive networking experiences and were reassured by the vibrancy of the sector in their region:

- Investigate the value of providing more Community Energy conferences in the future or other ways to create and sustain networking streams for groups in the region

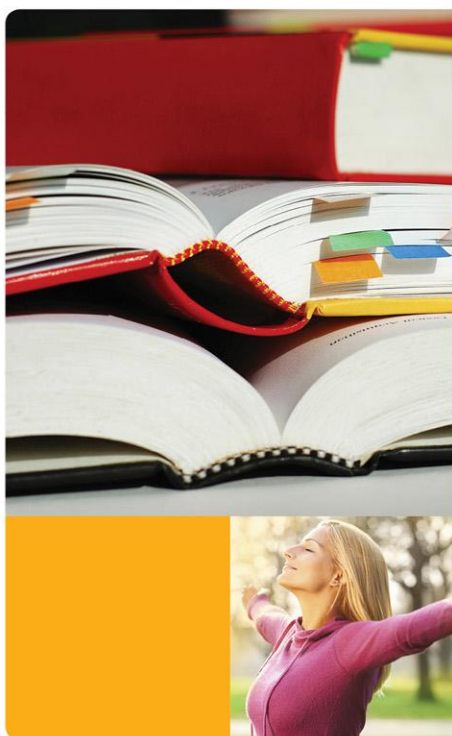
In addition to offering the Community Energy seed fund, respondents suggested that a greater focus around the costs and technicalities of connection were important going forward:

- Work to understand whether it would be financially viable to offer reduced network connections for renewables
- Investigate the potential to offer technical assistance when planning connections to help community groups overcome this barrier

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## 4.0 Appendices

The in-depth discussion guide utilised in the research.



## Appendix 1 – In-depth discussion guide

### Northern Powergrid

### Community Energy research

### In-depth interviews

### December 2015

Thank you for agreeing to take part in an interview. My name is X and I have been commissioned by Northern Powergrid to collect feedback on the impact of the Community Energy seed fund on your project and local community. This will help Northern Powergrid to understand the value of the seed fund and also provide evidence to offer it in 2016 for other community groups around the region.

I am aware that you have been asked by the Community Foundation to provide a progress report, and this phone call does not intend to be a repeat of what you have already or will respond back with. We are seeking to capture in more depth the social benefits resulting from Community Energy projects.

MRS Code of Conduct:

- Anonymity
- Okay to record

### INTERVIEWER TO FAMILIARISE THEMSELVES WITH PROGRESS UPDATE BEFORE COMPLETING INTERVIEW

#### 1.0 Warm up

- Just so I understand the context of your responses, can you tell me a little bit about your project and progress since your 6 month update?
  - How was your Community Energy group formed?
  - How many members does it have? What are the skills set?
- Are you partnered with any additional organisations for the project?
  - If yes, who are you partnered with? Where are they based?
  - Why are you partnered with them?
- What has the Community Energy seed fund been used for?

- How did you decide how the money was spent?
- Did you spend the money with a local business?
  - If yes, what proportion of the money was spent on local businesses?

## 2.0 Local benefit and future plans

- Do you have support from the local community for your project?
  - If yes, how did you get them on board?
  - If no, what opposition have you faced?
- How many people would you say have participated in the project? (Both project members and occasional helpers)
  - How have they participated
  - What would you say is the average age of the core members of your group?
  - How many volunteering hours would you estimate was spent on the project all in all up until now?
- Did you get help from any other Community Energy groups?
  - If yes, how did they help?
  - Did you ask for help for other groups?
  - How did you engage with them? (i.e. online, at an event)
- Are there any ways that your community is actively involved in the project?
  - If yes, how are they involved?
- What are the benefits of your Community Energy scheme to your local community? (Unprompted)
- Then prompt with:
  - Reducing energy bills for community individuals/organisations
    - If yes, who? how?
  - Creation of community benefit fund
    - If yes, how? who will this benefit?
  - Community activities / press around sustainability
    - If yes, what?

- Providing / protecting local assets
    - If yes, what? how?
  - Educational benefits
    - If yes, how?
  - Use of local contractors
  - Any other community benefits?
- Outside of the benefits resulting directly from your project, were there / will there be any side benefits from the initiative (Unprompted)
- Then prompt with:
  - Stronger sense of 'community'
  - People connecting and getting to know their neighbours
  - Raising awareness around sustainability / adopting new behaviours to reduce their carbon footprint / behaviour change
  - Reduced energy bills or stress levels
  - Better quality of life and health (i.e. from improved insulation)
- Why were these benefits important for you area?
- Have these benefits been realised yet?
  - If yes, what has been the impact for your local community?
  - If no, what will be the future impact?
    - ♣ Are there any potential barriers to you realising this impact?
- Do you have any plans to expand your Community Energy scheme in the future?
  - What are your plans?
  - How will they affect the local community?

### 3.0 Seed fund

- What has been the impact of the Northern Powergrid seed fund on your project?
- Are there any ways that the application process could be improved?
  - How?



- From what you know of Northern Powergrid, is there any other support you think they could bring to the Community Energy sector, other than the Seed Fund?
  - If yes, what? How?

## 4.0 Further comments

Do you have any further comments to make about anything we have discussed?

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