

# Community Action for Energy (CAfE)

## Briefing Note

### Local Sustainable Energy Projects: The Keys to Success

#### BACKGROUND

In their report to the Energy Saving Trust entitled 'The Benefits of Community-based Energy Efficiency Projects', independent researchers CAG presented the findings of their evaluation into how well a number of community-based sustainable energy projects were working. Their research concentrated on six projects in detail: Aberdeenshire Energy Advice Project (AEAP); Older Persons Energy Network (CAfE Case Study 5); Ecodyfi Community Renewable Energy (CAfE Case Study 8); Power Factory (CAfE Case Study 16); Working Herts Energy Efficiency Training Scheme (CAfE Case Study 11) and the Energy Care Network (TECN). CAG held focus group meetings to find out what the people involved in the projects really thought. They gathered the views of project managers and workers, community representatives and volunteers, as well as members of the community who had benefited from the services on offer.

#### WHAT THE RESEARCH REVEALED

The study shows that community-based energy projects not only deliver important **energy and carbon savings** that truly help individual households, but also bring wider **economic and social benefits** to the community as a whole. Not least among these is huge potential for restoring a sense of community spirit by bringing together people that do not ordinarily meet, while the training and work experience opportunities were seen to make a real difference to members of the community that are marginalised.

The research also found that the willingness of people in the community to get involved is really important. The study shows that the specialist knowledge of communities can help projects reach far larger numbers than could be achieved without real community involvement, which will help to raise long-term awareness of energy and fuel poverty issues.

The list below shows the wide range of benefits that were found to arise from the different projects:

- creating employment opportunities both in the organisations involved and the community at large
- training for staff and project workers to broaden their skills and incorporate knowledge about energy into their existing roles
- work experience for those who might otherwise have problems with finding employment
- significant financial improvements for those on benefits or low pay, due to linking energy-saving and grants information to existing advice about benefits
- creating new funding streams to support and enhance general community activities.

#### HOW CAN THIS RESEARCH HELP YOU?

In its conclusion to the report, CAG explains how the community-based approach to energy programmes will become even more important over the coming years. In view of this likelihood, the research draws conclusions from the detailed studies of real-life examples and the views of people actually involved, setting out clear pointers to the factors that make projects a success. You may find some of these findings useful when applying for funding for your sustainable energy project or for promoting your project or proposal.

## Key to Success

### 1. Put the Community at the Heart of Your Project

The CAG research showed that: “Where possible and practical, the community should be consulted before the project is established and involved in project management. Where this is not a realistic aim (for example, where the capacity is not available in the community) then the project should still be designed to respond to the needs of all those the project serves. Rooting a project within a community, as the examples in this report demonstrate, can harness and build on the enthusiasm of local people.”

Many of the projects in the study emphasised the importance of this.

- The Working Herts Energy Efficiency Training Scheme helps young unemployed people into work by providing them with training and work experience as they fit energy-saving measures into the homes of local people. By involving both tenants and potential trainees right from the start, Working Herts developed a service that people really want. The project is well into its seventh year, with an annual budget of £750,000. Every year around 100 young people are trained and then go on to install insulation into 1200 lofts and 400 cavity walls and fit around 200 houses with draughtproofing.
- Ecodyfi started life in 1998 as a partnership organisation. It now has 117 members, of which well over 80% are individual members of the community. As Ecodyfi transformed into a truly community-based organisation, so did its area of activity. Responding to local concerns and needs, it uses sustainable energy as a way to diversify the local economy, thereby bringing yet more investment into the community, which local people have used for renewable energy schemes. Success breeds success and these schemes are being copied by an increasingly aware local population.
- The Aberdeenshire Energy Advice Project and the Energy Care Network projects both show that when energy advisers and householders meet face-to-face things really start to happen. When the project workers got out and about in their communities, they helped householders to make the kind of significant energy savings that only personal contact can achieve. Both projects benefited from word of mouth endorsement, going on to achieve significant results not only from individual householders who benefited from energy advice, but also their wider families and the community: “[The service] helped fill the gap and this greatly improved the quality of life of the whole family, not just the person directly affected...” (Aberdeen EAP).

### 2. Make Sure Your Project is Working to the Right Scale and Avoids Bureaucracy

Time-consuming and complicated bureaucracy can be a real problem when a number of different organisations and partners get together. The situation is often made worse by having to meet complicated funding requirements. The CAG research recommends that all the partners involved in a project should look carefully at their organisation’s structures and procedures right at the start of a project and build in realistic timescales and business plans.

Have a clear management structure. While there is no one framework that is appropriate for all projects, it is vital that the **right** framework is employed. A rigorous management system ensures that everyone is clear about what the programme is trying to achieve and where it is going; it will be easier to spot problems and deal with them.

1. The Working Herts Energy Efficiency Training Scheme observed that project management is often a complicated process and, while energy projects should put the community at their heart, it is often unrealistic to expect the community to manage a project alone. Partnerships which involve organisations with project management and other experience can help solve this problem by combining local knowledge with specialist and technical expertise.
2. Ecodyfi provides a good example of a programme where the community has control through a board of elected members. The manager and project partners are responsible for day-to-day project delivery and they also support individual community members and groups by providing advice and helping them with bureaucracy and funding applications.

### **3. Allow Enough Time**

The most successful of the projects in the study gained momentum over a period of time – the longer they ran, the more success they achieved; too many projects end just as they are building up a head of steam. As the research says: “It can take a long time to build up awareness of the project and short-term and temporary approaches are unlikely to bear fruit. Therefore ensure you have adequate funding and resources in place when you start”.

Working Herts, Aberdeen EAP, The Energy Care Network and OPEN all got funding for at least three years at the start of their programmes, which allowed them to establish the projects, really engage the community and build on their success .

### **4. Provide a High-Quality Service**

There is no better way to promote a community-based energy project than by word of mouth recommendation; the only way to be sure of this is to provide a first-class service. The research notes that “providing a high quality service that responds to individual needs ensures that project aims are more effectively delivered”. All of the projects featured in the report provide good examples of the importance of a thorough, responsive and professional service.

- Working Herts actually draws upon feedback from clients to improve the training they give to the young recruits who carry out the bulk of the project’s practical measures, improving the service and enhancing the project’s reputation.
- The Energy Care Network is a good example of the importance of providing a quality service not only to community clients, but to project partners as well. In order to reach marginalised people who are often excluded from energy-saving schemes, the Network relies upon a good working relationship with organisations that have the trust of the community. Good lines of communication, prompt and responsive support are all part of the service that sustains these relationships and make the project a success.

### **5. Ensure that Working Conditions are Good for All Involved**

This is essential if everyone involved is to feel valued and supported; and those feelings are essential if the project is to work. “Project managers must ensure that all staff, and particularly frontline staff or volunteers, are offered decent working conditions and an appropriate level of support,” notes the CAG research.

This means clear management systems, appropriate training and regular communication. Projects that rely on volunteers need to pay special attention to this. There is now considerable competition from community organisations for volunteers and a lack of adequate support could result in voluntary staff losing interest in the project. It is key to ensure that everyone working on the project receives enough support to allow them to get the most from their involvement

One of the young people involved in Working Herts explained: “it has really helped give me some confidence and pride in what I do.”

If you would like to read the full CAG research report, it is available on the CAfE website at [www.est.co.uk/cafe](http://www.est.co.uk/cafe). Several of the projects featured in the report and in this briefing note are CAfE case studies and copies are available on the CAfE website or in hard copy. If you want any further help with using the issues raised by the research to help you plan your project, contact the CAfE helpline on 08701 261 444.

This resource forms part of Community Action for Energy (CAfE), a programme designed to promote and facilitate local community-based energy projects. CAfE is a programme from the Energy Saving Trust.

For further information, visit [www.est.co.uk/cafe](http://www.est.co.uk/cafe) or call the CAfE Community Helpline on 08701 261 444.