DTNI

Empowering Communities Through Energy

Public Enthusiasm & Northern Ireland's Role

Empowering Communities Through Energy: Public Enthusiasm and Northern Ireland's Role

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A recent publication by Common Wealth, *"The public is enthusiastic for community energy."*1, has shed new light on how people across the UK feel about local, community-owned renewable projects. The research underscores a growing consensus that communities can (and should) play a central role in shaping the future of sustainable energy. This is especially relevant in Northern Ireland, where pioneering initiatives are already demonstrating that community-led energy can be both transformative and highly popular.

Key Findings from the Research

1. **High Public Support**: The report highlights strong public backing for local, community-owned renewable energy initiatives. People are looking for tangible ways to tackle the climate crisis and want solutions that also strengthen their local economies.

2. **Shared Benefits**: Survey respondents recognise how community energy projects can deliver multiple benefits—beyond reducing carbon emissions. Local ownership, accountability, and revenue reinvestment into neighbourhood services (such as community facilities or energy poverty schemes) create a virtuous circle of social, environmental, and economic impacts.

3. **Policy Gaps**: Despite widespread public support, the research identifies barriers such as a lack of supportive government policy, insufficient funding streams, and difficulties navigating regulations. Overcoming these obstacles will be key to unlocking the full potential of community energy.

4. **Opportunity for Growth**: The findings suggest we are at a pivotal moment. If policymakers provide clearer frameworks and financial backing, there is enormous potential for community energy to scale up rapidly delivering secure, affordable, and low-carbon power to people across the UK.

Why Community Energy Matters

Community energy is about ordinary people taking collective control of how their power is produced, managed, and consumed. Whether through wind turbines, solar panels, district heating systems, or community-run energy cooperatives, these initiatives allow local groups to shape their own energy destiny.

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1 https://www.common-wealth.org/publications/the-public-is-enthusiastic-for-community-energy

The model can:

- **Improve local resilience**: Locally generated electricity keeps money in the area and reduces dependence on external sources.
- **Tackle fuel poverty**: Income from community energy can fund lower tariffs, energy efficiency upgrades, or targeted support for vulnerable households.
- **Build community cohesion**: Shared ownership creates deeper engagement and pride in local sustainability efforts.
- **Stimulate local economies**: Construction and maintenance of renewable projects create skilled, green jobs while profits circulate within the community.

Inspiring Community Energy Projects in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland already has a growing track record in community-led renewables, exemplifying the findings from the Common Wealth research. Here are just a few illustrative examples:

1. Drumlin Wind Energy Co-operative

A pioneer in the sector, **Drumlin Wind Energy Co-operative** operates community-owned wind turbines in counties Antrim, Down, Tyrone, and Fermanagh. Residents can buy shares in the co-op, meaning the profits from the turbines stay local. Beyond generating clean energy, Drumlin's cooperative model empowers members to play an active role in Northern Ireland's low-carbon transition.

2. Northern Ireland Community Energy (NICE)

Northern Ireland Community Energy (NICE) is another cooperative that installs solar PV systems on community buildings and social enterprises across Belfast and beyond. Through a share offer, individuals and organisations can invest in sustainable energy while receiving modest financial returns. The generated electricity often directly benefits community centres, charities, and educational facilities—helping reduce overheads and freeing up resources for vital community services.

3. Bryson Energy Projects

Part of the wider Bryson Charitable Group, **Bryson Energy** runs various programmes to tackle fuel poverty, promote energy efficiency, and increase renewables adoption in Northern Ireland. While not purely a community-owned model, Bryson's initiatives often
work closely with local groups to enhance capacity and deliver practical, cost-saving solutions. Through its partnerships, Bryson Energy has helped many communities take the first steps towards greener, more affordable power.

Overcoming the Barriers

Despite these uplifting stories, community energy in Northern Ireland—and across the UK—faces headwinds, many of which the Common Wealth research brings to the forefront:

1. **Policy Support**

   o **Streamlined Planning**: Community groups often find the planning process too time-consuming or expensive. A more supportive policy environment would ease administrative burdens, particularly for smaller-scale initiatives.

   o **Financial Mechanisms**: Access to low-interest loans or grants can help cover upfront costs of installing renewable technologies. Ensuring that government-backed funds are available—and well-publicised—would accelerate project uptake.

2. **Local Leadership**

   o **Community Capacity Building**: Education and training around renewable technology and co-operative business models can give residents the confidence to spearhead new projects.

   o **Local Authority Involvement**: Councils could facilitate networking, provide land, buildings or rooftops for installations, and signpost relevant grant funding opportunities.

3. **Public Engagement**

   o **Trust and Transparency**: Clear communication of benefits, risks, and returns can help ensure widespread public backing. Opening up opportunities for direct investment—no matter how small—fosters a stronger sense of ownership.

The Road Ahead for Northern Ireland

In light of the new data from Common Wealth, Northern Ireland is well-positioned to further champion community energy. The local examples above illustrate that not only are such projects possible, but they can thrive when local people are at the helm. With more robust and supportive policy frameworks, community groups across the region could replicate successes like Drumlin and NICE amplifying the social, economic, and environmental benefits for all.

What's needed now?

- **Collaboration**: More dialogue between policymakers, local councils, community groups, and third-sector organisations to streamline the development of new initiatives.

- **Innovative Financing**: Better financial instruments tailored to community groups that may not have large sums of capital at the start.
- **Champions and Advocates**: Local leaders and organisations—such as Development Trusts Northern Ireland (DTNI) can continue to showcase success stories and share expertise to catalyse further projects.

In Summary

Common Wealth's findings confirm that enthusiasm for community energy is at an all-time high. From local ownership of renewable infrastructure to tangible benefits for people facing energy poverty, the evidence speaks for itself: communities want and deserve more control over their energy futures.

Northern Ireland, with its growing portfolio of community wind co-ops and solar initiatives, can serve as a beacon of what's possible when local people unite around a shared vision for sustainability. By expanding these efforts, removing regulatory hurdles, and fostering collaboration between stakeholders, community energy can shift from a pioneering concept to the mainstream backbone of Northern Ireland's renewable landscape—empowering people, protecting the planet, and ensuring that the benefits of the energy transition are felt by all.

If you would like to chat to **DTNI** about community-driven innovation across Northern Ireland such as community energy initiatives—please get in touch. Together, we can harness this wave of public enthusiasm and help our communities transform how we generate, share, and benefit from clean energy.

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