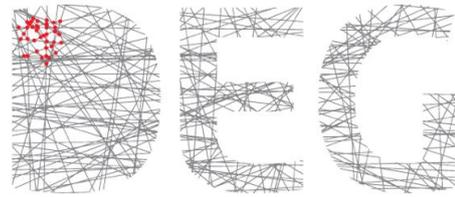


# Understanding, Promoting and Supporting Community Energy in Rural Wales



Datblygiadau Egni Gwledig

Action Research undertaken by DEG on behalf of Gwynedd Economic Partnership

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Version: Final



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## About DEG

Grant Peisley and Bethan Gritten are founder directors of Datblygiadau Egni Gwledig (DEG) which works across North West Wales to provide communities with the confidence, knowledge and ambition to take ownership of their future through projects such as:

- ▶ Reducing energy use, fuel costs and dependence on unsustainable fuels.
- ▶ Strengthening the local economy.
- ▶ Generating sustainable electricity and heat.

DEG facilitates a network of community energy groups in Gwynedd, Môn and Conwy and hosts events to connect communities, share skills and experiences and co-ordinate the local community energy sector.

DEG provides information on what is possible, what has been achieved elsewhere in our area and best practise from communities across Britain, helping groups with:

- ▶ Identifying opportunities for communities.
- ▶ Getting people involved.
- ▶ Project planning and development.
- ▶ Locating expertise.
- ▶ Raising finance to make projects happen.



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## Summary

This report is the output of a short action research project commissioned by Gwynedd Council and conducted by DEG, aiming to:

- i. Promote community renewable energy projects in rural Gwynedd.
- ii. Publicise and build upon that which was achieved through the Gwynedd Werdd programme.
- iii. Understand communities' opinions and aspirations in relation to the support which could be provided by the local public sector.
- iv. Collect information which could shape and maximise the potential of the forthcoming LEADER funding in relation to community energy.

Community owned renewable energy generation capacity in the UK has grown fourteen fold in the last 10 years and is still rapidly increasing. However, Wales is lagging behind Scotland and England and northwest Wales is behind other areas in Wales. The window of opportunity for securing the revenue stream that makes renewable energy projects attractive is swiftly closing as the RHI and FIT undergo regular 'digressions'. Local action is needed now if Gwynedd is to make the most of the transformative economic change offered by community owned renewable energy.

Despite this, five of the most advanced community energy groups in Gwynedd will be making a combined investment of over £5 million in developing their projects. This investment will see combined income of over £600 thousand per annum directly into the communities involved. When combined with potential savings from energy efficiency schemes being undertaken by these groups the return per annum raises to £1.1 million.

The research focused on two main participant groups; those already active within the field of community energy and others known by the researchers to be active in their communities but who had not yet taken part in a community energy project. The methodology deployed was designed not to be of academic rigour but to provide a structured, practical approach to gathering enough meaningful data, within budgetary and time constraints, to guide future actions. Questionnaires, structured interviews, and focus groups were used to gather data.

Findings from existing community energy groups highlight reasons for involvement, restrictions to further involvement, experiences of community energy practitioners, and the support context.

Findings from community activists not presently involved in a community energy project highlight perceptions of the benefits of involvement in community energy, perceived challenges, reasons for not being involved already, priorities for the income from a project, and perceived support needs.

There were a number of similarities between the findings of the two groups despite the differences in experiences of the participants and therefore greater depth of knowledge of the existing practitioners. Such issues as locating suitable sites with appropriate resources for a community energy project and providing access to these resources and land were raised by the potential practitioners but not by the existing group, who have already located resources. Potential practitioners also spoke about energy being a non-tangible focus for a community project yet this did not appear as an issue for the existing group.

Meanwhile, the existing group highlighted the need to assist government, at all levels, to develop suitable strategy, policies and practices that would support the decentralisation and local ownership of energy generation. This is an insight provided by their experience; experiences the potential practitioners are yet to have.

There were, however, many significant similarities between the findings of the two groups, suggesting that support needs to address:

- i. Volunteers' time constraints.
- ii. The complexity inherent in community energy projects.
- iii. The expertise needed within community energy groups.

Furthermore, both groups highlighted the need for greater leadership and support across government levels, with particular attention on facilitating a smoother, more enabling planning and consenting process. Both focus groups also believed National and Local Government should be assisting with grid capacity and connection issues, with costs being covered by European funding.

The two groups also expressed a need for raising awareness of the potential of community energy and the successes of existing schemes. This should include study visits to groups to facilitate shared learning. Both groups would like to see continued support for the existing local community energy network and highlighted the need for local support mechanisms.

Recommendations are made at four key levels: UK/Welsh Government, Local Government/Public Sector and the Local Community Energy Network:

<b>Support recommendations</b>	
<b>Level</b>	<b>Support Opportunity</b>
<b>UK/Welsh Government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Provide political support for the sector.</li> <li>ii. Require District Network Operators to provide community renewable projects with a fast tracked and more affordable service.</li> <li>iii. Provide strategic funding and address European funding issues.</li> </ul>
<b>National Community Energy Sector</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Create a project management template.</li> <li>ii. Provide a network of experts.</li> <li>iii. Distribute funding.</li> <li>iv. Provide information on technological developments and policy updates.</li> <li>v. Assist in the development of a strategy for government.</li> </ul>
<b>Local Public Sector</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Work with Welsh Government to ensure regulatory bodies are linked up in support of community energy.</li> <li>ii. Facilitate the development of projects on public land.</li> <li>iii. Openly support private landowners allowing communities to develop projects on their land.</li> <li>iv. Fund mentoring and events for the peer learning network.</li> <li>v. Fund further support from within local community sector.</li> </ul>
<b>Local Community Energy Network</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Provide specialist support to enable groups to progress quickly and efficiently.</li> <li>ii. Co-ordinate the input of experts to complete the most technical and complex tasks.</li> <li>iii. Raise awareness of the potential of community energy and the successes of existing schemes.</li> <li>iv. Provide study visits between groups to facilitate shared learning.</li> <li>v. Facilitate mentoring from one community group to another.</li> <li>vi. Disseminate relevant information and support groups to build capacity within project teams.</li> <li>vii. Work alongside local government to create a strategic approach to community energy.</li> <li>viii. Provide a concerted voice for community energy in Gwynedd.</li> </ul>

