



Energy Learning Network
Rhwydwaith Addysg Ynni

Partnering to secure funding

Local authority support of community energy

There are numerous ways that local authorities can support community energy, for example through offering resources, capacity, access to generation sites and to stakeholder networks.

They can also be a customer for the services that community energy delivers. In return, community energy groups can help councils to meet their net zero, community wealth building and equity goals. Such partnerships promote more inclusive decision-making and equitable outcomes, advancing locally driven solutions shaped by community priorities and aspirations.

The Energy Learning Network is producing a series of case studies to illustrate how different councils are supporting, and benefiting from, community energy.

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Three Rivers District Council and Grand Union Community Energy

Three Rivers District Council (TRDC) and Grand Union Community Energy (GUCE) have developed a partnership approach to delivering local climate action that makes best use of each organisation's strengths, demonstrating an effective model for similar collaborations across the UK.

GUCE is a community benefit society, established to improve local community resilience in the face of increasing energy costs and climate change - enabling the local residents to do something real and lasting about climate change. In April 2023, GUCE were part of Three Rivers District Council's winning bid for a Fast Followers grant through Innovate UK. The grant is being used to fund a programme of work to identify and help overcome the non-technical barriers that hinder progress on net-zero locally. Two of the work streams involved GUCE:

- **Transition Streets** (a 'power down' project – encouraging more efficient use of energy). Transition Streets involves engaging neighbours, streets, and communities supporting each other to save money and reduce their consumption and waste. The Fast Followers grant has allowed Three Rivers to trial the Transition Streets approach to sustainable behavioural change, which has proven effective in other parts of the country previously. The project involves GUCE facilitating workshops for different neighbourhood groups, comprising an introductory session followed by workshops on energy, water, food, travel, resources, and biodiversity. Free thermal imaging surveys are also offered to help participants visualise areas of heat loss in their homes and encourage them to undertake retrofit. As part of these workshops, GUCE also inspired householders to take advantage of the pilot 'Retrofit One Stop Shop' free advice service being delivered in the District (under a different workstream of the Fast Followers programme) by the charity The National Energy Foundation.
- **Community energy on local buildings** (a 'power up' project encouraging renewable energy generation). This workstream is promoting community-funded retrofit options for local community buildings in the district. GUCE are engaging with schools, leisure centres and other local community buildings about how community energy can support them to switch to renewables for their energy supply without the high upfront cost. The goal is to show them how community energy solutions can provide long-term energy bill security while reducing their organisation's carbon footprint.



What impact has it had?

Transition Streets

At the time of writing, two groups of neighbours have completed the Transition Streets programme with several others in progress. GUCE will be collecting evaluation information for the project by asking participants to complete a standard survey before and after the programme.

The main feedback from workshops is that participants really value learning about simple things they can do to make their lives easier and save money whilst also reducing their carbon footprint. They also really value the community connection and getting to know their neighbours.



It's early days, but findings from the first group show that:

- Six members have had a free retrofit assessment survey completed, resulting in participants installing a range of measures including smart thermostats, LED lighting, loft insulation, draughtproofing for windows and doors, radiator foils and insulating window films.
- Two participants have had cavity wall insulation installed, with a third planning to, which is forecast to save them £140 annually on their energy bill and reduce CO2 by over 385kg per annum. One participant has insulated their flat roof and improved ventilation in their bathroom.
- Households have also pledged to sharing excess food with each other and the wider community (via the Olio food-sharing app).
- There have also been commitments to cut water consumption by making simple changes in the home – and to sharing rainwater by enabling households without the potential for water butts to access their neighbours'.

Community energy on local buildings

This project aims to remove the non-technical barriers to installing community-funded renewables on schools and community buildings. This project is still in its early days and has faced a number of challenges, particularly around putting solar on schools, detailed below.



What is making it work?

Both GUCE and TRDC say that having a genuine partnership, based on respect and equality, has been instrumental to the success of their joint work.

- TRDC is benefitting from GUCE's expertise and community reach, and from the additional 'bandwidth' they afford the council.
- GUCE is benefitting from access to funding and increased legitimacy.

Community energy was quite a new concept to the Council three years ago and they wanted to bring in a partner with expertise in this area. GUCE was the ideal partner. Until recently, there were only two people in the Council's climate change team, so their capacity for community engagement was very limited.

GUCE report that the partnership approach taken by TRDC is very different from that of other councils they have worked with, which can look at a partner providing external support, like GUCE, as a subcontractor rather than an equal partner. For example, rather than TRDC securing funding and then subcontracting work to GUCE, they involved GUCE in the development of the bid.

“TRDC have amazing officers who get it, they understand community energy. They ask our opinion on what approach they should take – it’s a collaborative partnership, based on respect and equality. We feel that we are really listened to. We’ve worked for other councils where it’s very arms length.”

Sarah Burgess, GUCE Development Officer

“Councils can really struggle with community engagement – it’s fantastic to have an expert partner like GUCE which is embedded in the community. This gives the council additional bandwidth to help us meet our net zero targets. We feel very lucky to have GUCE.”

Ellie Nathan, Net Zero Innovation Project Manager, TRDC

For local authorities: a key delivery partner

By identifying GUCE as a partner and bringing them to the table with the council's wider networks, GUCE has been given credibility – something that is opening up wider opportunities for the organisation. For example, as a result of introductions by TRDC, GUCE have been invited to input to the development of the county's retrofit strategy bringing in a community energy angle to retrofit, and helping to create a more rounded/community focused and informed (and hopefully more implementable) strategy.

In terms of advice for other councils, Sarah from GUCE suggests that councils should treat their community energy groups as genuine partners, rather than subcontractors. This will help to enable the development of well-informed initiatives that will deliver the greatest benefit to the local community. As a starting point, this might involve the council meeting with local community energy groups to identify areas the council's priorities overlap with the groups', and involving them in the development of strategies and funding bids.

“It's been a game changer for us being involved with Three Rivers District Council. It's really helped to give us that credibility.”

Sarah Burgess, GUCE Development Officer

What resources were needed and how was it funded?

GUCE is receiving £29,000 of funding from the Fast Followers grant over two years. This is primarily being used to pay for staffing to run the Transition Streets workshops and undertake engagement on the community energy on local buildings workstream, with about £1,500 to cover materials.

From the council's side, there is a full-time officer working on the programme, which covers five workstreams in total. This funded resource has given them capacity to engage with GUCE. Notably, the other teams within the council – e.g. the communications team and legal teams – have provided support which is contributing to the project success.

Any barriers?

Historically the Council has struggled with community engagement on sustainability and wouldn't be able to deliver a project like Transition Streets themselves. Bringing in GUCE to lead the community engagement has been very effective – they are well known and respected in the community and have a great network of local organisations they work with.

On the 'Power Up' element of the project, the present lack of a county-wide policy on community energy funded solar for maintained schools has been identified as a key barrier to leveraging community funding for school retrofits. However, the project team is working closely with the relevant authority to help secure a positive policy that all schools in the county can benefit from.

Lessons learned

A project like this requires a good level of trust between the council and the community energy group. The Council suggests it's worth investing time to get to know your area's community groups – including community energy groups, but also others such as food banks.

Funding is critical. GUCE, like most community energy groups, relies largely on volunteers. To scale up their ambition, they need funding. Local authorities that want help from their community energy groups should either provide that funding directly or, as in the case of the GUCE/TRDC partnership, work with them to secure external funding.

“There are so many community groups with passionate, knowledgeable people who can really help the council deliver against its objectives. Make the most of them. And in particular, look out for the community groups that people point you to – there's a reason why people are suggesting them.”

Ellie Nathan, Net Zero Innovation Project Manager, TRDC

Useful information

Three Rivers District Council – climate.change@threerivers.gov.uk

- GUCE – sarah.burgess@guce.org.uk
- Transition Streets **leaflet** or **handbook**.
- Transition Streets history: **Transition Streets - Transition Town Totnes**
- To find out about community energy groups in your area, try asking Community Energy England .

Acknowledgements

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The Energy Learning Network

The network is powering forward community energy projects across the UK – helping more groups launch or grow schemes that decarbonise the grid, create resilience, reduce energy bills, and create meaningful benefits for local people. It is a collaboration between climate solutions charity Ashden, the Centre for Sustainable Energy, and leading community energy bodies in every UK nation: Community Energy England, Community Energy Scotland, Community Energy Wales, and Northern Ireland's Action Renewables.



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For further information visit:

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