



Brighton Energy Cooperative

Brighton, England

Brighton Energy Co-op began in 2010, when 8 people invested the start-up capital to enable their first share launch in 2012. 120 people then joined the co-op and their first solar PV systems were built. In summary, the project enables people to put in a small amount of money to collectively build large scale renewable energy systems. The co-op now has up to 600 members and has raised over £3,000,000.

Any money raised from selling electricity flows back into the co-op is redistributed through interest to members, paying back capital and through their community fund.



Key contact

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Links

Website: <https://www.brightonenergy.org.uk/>
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/BrightonEnergyCoOp/>
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LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/brighton-energy-co-op/>



Interview Questions and Responses

Could we start with a brief description of Brighton Energy Cooperative?

Damian Tow co-founded Brighton Energy Cooperative nearly 13 years ago, having worked in programme management in the IT and telecoms sector for 15 years. The co-op was one of the first 10 community energy organisations within the UK. They realised they had to follow a legal entity to make shares and have followed a journey of discovery since. Over the last 13 years they have raised around £4.1 million, established 42 sites and generated 4 megawatts of solar PV.

How do you determine the key objectives for a solar PV project and what it needs to deliver?

The core aim of Brighton Energy Co-op relates to decarbonisation and the roll-out of as much community owned PV as possible. It is important that each project stands alone financially. Therefore, the Co-op have a financial model to shape key financial objectives, marking the profit and loss for each project to ensure profit from year one after all costs are paid and capital/interest has been paid to investors.

Despite being a not-for-profit organisation, they still have to make a surplus which can then be reinvested in new projects, maintenance or benefits for the wider community (such as educational projects).

How does the cooperative model allow you to decide specific objectives for community owned energy projects?

The cooperative model is about ownership and benefit. The Brighton Energy Cooperative operates as a business and has to make a financial profit, as Brighton Energy Ltd. Output is split into the environmental, social and financial output, which are the core objectives of community owned energy projects.

As a community benefit society, the Brighton Energy Cooperative has to benefit the community overall (through access to cheaper electricity at the sites, for example). They have 750 members (largely from Sussex or Brighton), who invest roughly £5000 on average.



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How do you decide upon a specific solar PV project idea?

It is based around finding sites which are willing to go ahead, as the many potential sites typically narrow down to around 4-5 installations every year. The Co-op identifies sites on maps, talking to trade associations or uses social media channels to develop their business development pipeline. The Co-op then distills down potential target sites for installing PV and engages with key decision makers to make them aware of their offer, which is essentially leasing their roof for 25 years and offering them discounted green energy.

Once interested organisations are identified, the Co-op then go through a process of assessing suitability, through structural surveys and getting connection permission from the grid, before reaching the point of signing the lease. When this point has been reached, they begin raising the money.

Describe the process by which you achieve consensus around objectives and projects internally and amongst communities.

The Brighton Energy Co-op consists of 2 executive directors, 4 non-executive directors and 5 other staff. This internal team has weekly team meetings and monthly board meetings covering different stages of decision making. The AGM only covers existing activity and future plans. Therefore, reaching consensus rests on a small core team.

The Co-op has also undertaken community engagement with parish councils if there has been concern about the aesthetics of a solar project and consulted communities on potential EV charge point locations.

How do you approach planning and project management around selected ideas? How does the cooperative model benefit that?

Damian has a strong background in project management and has a robust project plan to get the project to the stage of raising money, followed by a more detailed project plan relating to installation. The Co-op also outsources installation, admin, accounting, electrical checks and maintenance. The cooperative model does not directly support project management, however it mobilises communities in developing projects.

Has the community managed to stay true to the original project vision?

The Co-op's vision of installing solar PV aligns closely with their objectives as a community benefit society. As a result, they have continued with solar PV projects and have completed one project with EV charge points, linked to PV. The simple vision of raising funding and installing PV to benefit the community still remains true.

How did you identify a funding need?

Brighton Energy Cooperative has undergone a number of stages of fund raising over the last 13 years. Damian estimated that in total they have done around 10 share offers. In the initial phases of taking the organisation from an idea, the three original directors worked unpaid for around 18 months but needed funding for external costs. They then raised money through a pioneer share offer, which is the earliest stage of a share offer where a member's investment is at most risk. Damian believed that using investment from members and doing their best to deliver solar projects has been a key motivating factor.

How have you managed the process of bidding for funding?

Brighton Energy Cooperative has benefitted from grants, but the vast majority of their funding is through community shares. They received funding through the Next Generation Fund for the testing of new community energy business models. This funding was complicated and a comprehensive application and interview stage which was managed internally, but the funding was paid up front.

Did you have a need for specialist expertise? If so how did you handle that and approach experts?

The majority of staff at the Co-op do elements of HR, technical activities, legal and marketing, but they procure experts if necessary. For example, the Co-op sourced health and safety consultants to improve processes.

What have been the hardest difficulties to overcome and how did you overcome them?

Enabling a host community to stick with their decision for a site has been challenging. The Co-Op has learnt to share decision making and assess risks internally to gain the combined knowledge of people who have worked across sectors.

What have been the biggest learnings from the delivery of your project?

The quality of installation is important and a lot of maintenance issues arise. Communities pursuing solar projects should budget for maintenance. In addition, legal issues have occurred when developing the leases. Typically, Brighton Energy Cooperative has not used a solicitor for negotiating leases, but Damian felt that setting a budget for a conveyancing solicitor could be useful for energy cooperatives.

What decisions, or elements of organisation have been the most important in project delivery?

The Brighton Energy Cooperative had to have a certain appetite for risk, and minimise financial, technical and operational risks when it came to new technology. The organisation was fast moving and seized new opportunities to see how they could grow and adopt new innovations. Damian felt that their entrepreneurial mindset and decision-making capabilities were important elements of their organisation.

What were the most important sources of advice and guidance for your group as you moved through the different phases of the project?

Brighton Energy Cooperative give advice more than they receive it now. However, they do seek advice from other community energy organisations. Damian believed that the geographical spread of community owned energy organisations reduced competition which enabled the sharing of ideas and solutions.

What advice would you give to communities looking to develop community owned energy projects?

The majority of fundraising by the Co-op has a 4% erosion of the benefit they offer due to high base rates, reducing the attraction from a financial perspective. As a result, the Co-op are now looking to offer a bond instead of community shares due to a shorter time frame with a higher interest rate.

As projects ran by the Brighton Energy Cooperative last 25 years, Damian believed that you have to be willing to do the project for the long run and recommended considering:

- Are you willing to run a business?
- How many years are you willing to run a business for?
- Are the start-up funds available?



Cloughjordan Ecovillage

 Cloughjordan, County Tipperary

In 1999, Sustainable Projects Ireland Ltd sought to establish Ireland's first ecovillage. The plan was to create a community of dedicated environmentalists; to buy a site together on which they could each build their lives.

After 2 years, the site beside Cloughjordan town was selected and meetings between the future residents occurred. Consensus decision-making was used to ensure each community member had their say in the development plan. By 2005, money had been raised and planning permission granted, enabling the Cloughjordan Ecovillage site to be purchased. In 2009, the first residents moved in, and the village began to develop rapidly. By 2012, Cloughjordan Ecovillage had fibre optic broadband installed, 500m2 solar panel array, eco-hostel, eco-enterprise centre and 50 homes completed or under construction.



Interview Questions and Responses

How did you, as a community, agree the key objectives that you wanted the ecovillage to deliver?

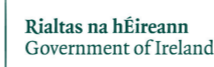
In 1999, the group was established as an educational charity, with the aim of developing a destination to learn from and a great place to live, work and play. The project displayed a new approach to rural community development centred upon pioneering ideas of sustainability. The group spent 2–3 years collectively identifying ideas and sites. The process of identifying the site at Cloughjordan involved assembling the assets required and working with ecological designers and an architect. In 2003, the group provided a deposit for the land for a one year lease, before buying the land in 2004 using a loan from AIB.

The group collectively focused upon gaining zoning and planning permission, and conducted independent studies on the land to enable the construction of the first 30 houses in 2009. In the last 3 years, the group has gathered momentum following the impact of the global financial crisis and 55 homes are now occupied. The sale of sites will allow for the repayment of loans and enable infrastructure completion.

The group has developed a number of individually and community-owned enterprises. The core example is the Cloughjordan Ecovillage educational charity, which provides education through training programmes which fund the running of the charity.

How do you typically develop new projects within the ecovillage?

As people moved into Cloughjordan Ecovillage they sought to find ways to make a living locally. Residents created smaller businesses based within the ecovillage or brought businesses with them. Some projects are therefore 2 or 3 people coming together to make their own livelihood, while other larger businesses are at a community scale. For example, the community is home to an independent bookshop, Cloughjordan Community Farm (with 2–3 active employees) and a community-based internet company which was established to install fibre optics within the community.



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Describe the process by which you achieved consensus around objectives and projects?

The Cloughjordan Ecovillage educational charity has between 80 and 90 members, who meet once a month and utilise a consensus decision making process to ensure all voices are heard. The process of consensus building has helped to bind the community together, and enabled the sharing of voices and opinions.

Cloughjordan Community Farm utilises a different approach – consent decision making. This quick process involves identifying objections to ideas and is typically used within smaller working groups and organisations in the community.

How do you typically approach planning and project management around selected ideas?

Within Cloughjordan Ecovillage, working groups are established around specific primary activities such as land use, education and process and a coordination group supports these working groups to ensure collaboration and communication between primary activities. This helps consensus decision making to be maintained within project management. For other entities Cloughjordan Ecovillage educational charity licenses out land to organisations within the ecovillage, who then make autonomous decisions internally.

Has the original project vision stood the test of time?

The community embarked on its journey with a vision of developing the ecovillage. However the community did not know what the experience of living in a community would entail, or the nature of their future homes or land. It has since exceeded expectations and much of what the founders set out to achieve has become reality.

How did you identify a funding need? How have you managed the process of bidding for funding?

Funding for the Cloughjordan Ecovillage has been self-generated or project specific, meaning that the community has largely funded the €2m project. The group did not want to source a large grant to fund the entirety of the ecovillage as it would make the project hard to replicate for others.

Some examples of specific funding streams accessed by Cloughjordan Ecovillage include:

- In 2022 Cloughjordan Ecovillage educational charity and Cultivate were successful in obtaining funding from a community climate action programme offered by the Department for Environment.

- The Irish Environmental Network (IEN) provides annual funding through their education and advocacy project.
- The Department for Agriculture provided funding to establish and manage the local woodland.
- European Union funding was obtained for the development of the community-owned district heating system.
- Loans from community members.

Each of the 80–90 members of the Cloughjordan Ecovillage education charity are encouraged to provide around 100 voluntary hours each year, supported by 4 employees. Other organisations at Cloughjordan Ecovillage are entirely self-sufficient, such as Cloughjordan Community Farm, operating on a subscription basis.

Did you have a need for specialist expertise?

The majority of work has been completed by volunteer experts who have relevant professional expertise. For example, members have supported the development of the wetlands. The community is aiming to release new sites and develop affordable housing to attract new residents and bring new expertise to the community.

What have been the hardest difficulties to overcome?

The group has experienced and overcome a number of difficulties. A major difficulty for the group was the economic crisis in 2008, which caused a number of members to leave the project. In addition, funding and financial issues have proved to be a key issue for the group. Additional funding is required to overcome infrastructural challenges, including upgrading the wastewater treatment, establishing biodiversity friendly street lighting, completing footpaths and bridges and upgrading solar panels.

What have been the biggest learnings from the development of Cloughjordan Ecovillage?

Davie and Veronica suggested that other communities should identify what they can change and determine which elements of Cloughjordan Ecovillage they could bring into their own community. The district heating systems, sustainable urban draining systems, integrated constructed wetlands, co-housing models, community supported agriculture, or support of local food producers are all elements of Cloughjordan Ecovillage which could inspire other communities across the Midlands of Ireland.

What decisions, or elements of organisation have been the most important in the development of Cloughjordan Ecovillage?

The community aimed to mainstream and normalise sustainability by creating a new type of village. Therefore the community decided to build the ecovillage independently, rather than seeking large grants and procuring major consultants.

The second key decision was to make the Cloughjordan Ecovillage an educational project for other communities, which has enabled members of the community to remain passionate about the project.

What were the most important sources of advice and guidance for your group as you moved through the different phases of development?

As Cloughjordan Ecovillage was a pioneering community, many thought leaders from across the globe have visited the ecovillage. Each time a group visits the ecovillage they ask new questions which provoke thoughts and ideas and remind the group of the importance of the project.

Key contacts

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Links

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Developing Sustainable Energy Projects, SEAI

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland are supporting communities to develop community owned sustainable energy projects. The primary way of achieving this is by supporting communities to form Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs) and supporting communities in developing Energy Masterplans, Energy Audits, feasibility studies and accessing funding.



Interview Questions and Responses

How do communities agree the key objectives that projects aim to deliver?

The first step communities must take is to establish a Community Charter in order to develop an Energy Masterplan as part of SEC. As part of this process, communities identify their core aim and areas of interest across:

- Renewable Energy
- Energy Efficiency & Savings
- Low Carbon Community
- Energy Education and Behaviour
- Sustainable Transport
- Fuel Poverty

The Community Charter is influenced by an existing committee or sub-committee of an active community group, which shapes the objectives of a Sustainable Energy Community and the subsequent projects they want to deliver.

How do communities decide upon a single project idea?

Energy Masterplans are key for communities to understand the magnitude of benefits and to which organisations. Following this, communities identify projects by undertaking Energy Audits, leading to a register of opportunities across a community with identified costs and benefits for particular projects.

Describe the process by which communities achieve consensus around objectives and projects?

Sustainable energy projects don't initially have community consensus.

For example, a community may resist projects situated away from the community and going beyond a community boundary. However, projects must follow an open and inclusive membership model if funded by the SEAI and the SEC must work closely with community members in an open forum to arrive at a consensus.



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How do communities typically approach planning and project management around a selected idea?

SECs should have individuals with technical engineering skills to enable strong project management. For example, having individuals who have developed infrastructure projects. Individuals with a finance or community development background are also important for overseeing project delivery.

How do communities revise their plans? How do they typically manage that process?

Communities which are designated SECs often have a finance contact and project coordinator who can directly deal with small-scale changes. If communities revise their plans substantially, requests for changes come via SEC Boards.

How do communities identify a funding need?

SECs can attend a range of SEAI workshops, utilise bi-monthly newsletters and a mentor specifically dedicated to them. Communities typically use these methods for identifying a funding source, based upon costs uncovered in feasibility studies previously undertaken.

How do communities manage the process of bidding for funding?

The process for bidding is led by SECs and supported by SEAI Project Coordinators.

What type of specialist expertise are typically required for projects? How do communities handle that and approach experts?

SEAI provide a panel of trusted advisors free of charge and we can direct SECs to specific expertise for developing projects.

In addition, the SEAI provide a pre-feasibility service for sustainable energy projects to consider viability.

SECs typically approach the SEAI directly through SEAI Project Coordinators to identify specialist expertise.

What have been the hardest difficulties for communities overcome and how do they overcome them?

The largest difficulty is reaching commercialisation stage and sustainable energy projects often require larger scale finance than provided by the SEAI. SECs therefore have to identify potential other private or public funding sources, or potentially launch a community ownership model.

Do communities often stay true to the original project vision? If not, why not?

Although SECs do stay true to their project vision, all options to achieve a net zero target should be open to discussion. For example, the Aran Islands Energy Co-operative require 2.5MW of wind to be carbon neutral but they are constrained by grid capacity and are open to considering multiple forms of technology to reaching their goal.

What have been the biggest learnings from the delivery of community projects?

SECs must be honest and transparent about the process and work closely with communities to deliver community energy projects.

In parallel, SECs must have an awareness of government policy and potential outcomes for shaping community energy, such as actions taken to shape local grid connections.

What decisions, or elements of organisation have been the most important in delivering projects?

Having the vision of what the SEC wants to achieve is critical for developing successful projects. Having a shared vision enables the design of projects to drive the vision.

Undertaking a feasibility study for potential projects is an important decision to take as communities can identify potential grid connections, sites and options for projects.

What are the most important sources of advice and guidance for communities as they move through the different phases of projects?

The key sources include SEAI toolkits, Community Power as a leader in Ireland for community owned energy, LEADER Local Action Groups, Local Development Companies and County Councils.

Key contact

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Links

Website: <https://www.seai.ie/community-energy/sustainable-energy-communities/start-an-energy-community/index.xml>



Humshaugh Net Zero PV Project

Humshaugh, Northumberland, England

Humshaugh Net Zero (HNZ), a community based climate action organisation in Northumberland, have agreement with a local landowner to begin developing a PV project of up to 1 MW, capable of supplying the average electricity needs for more than 150 households.

Work has begun on the detailed design of the project and HNZ are in discussions with Northern Powergrid regarding securing grid connection. Planning permission application was submitted in October 2022 and are awaiting full permission from Northumberland County Council.



Interview Questions and Responses

How did you as a community agree the key objectives that you wanted your project to deliver?

Northumberland County Council declared a climate emergency and to reach net zero 2030. Humshaugh Parish Council then declared a climate emergency. An initial group came together to decide how to tackle the climate emergency and we started with a residential household survey.

This survey identified CO₂ – electricity usage, heating, transport locally, transport long-distance, emissions associated with food and recycling. That gave HNZ a headline figure for total CO₂ for the parish. It localised the climate issue for HNZ and identified what kind of emissions needed to be removed to become net zero by 2030.

How did you decide upon a single project idea that could deliver against those objectives?

HNZ began identifying what could the community do locally in terms of parish based low carbon energy generation.

HNZ obtained a grant from the RCEF (Rural Community Energy Fund) scoping exercise at potential opportunities for low carbon generation and a comprehensive survey of options by a consultant lead. This focused HNZ upon two options – onshore wind and solar PV.

There is a lot of debate around onshore wind in Northumberland, and collectively as a group HNZ pursued the feasible path of solar PV.

Describe the process by which you achieved consensus around objectives and projects. Has that consensus held or does it remain challenged by some in the community? If so, how are you dealing with that?

HNZ developed a clear proposal for the local community for a 1MW farm. HNZ then organised a public in-person meeting, received many questions and responded in person. On the whole, there was no significant challenge.



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How did you approach planning and project management around your selected idea?

HNZ have a breadth of expertise in their community. David Sill CBE and Bill Grainger have a strong renewables background and are leading on behalf of HNZ.

Although the PV project will be managed by contractors, the HNZ Board will have oversight of this process, led by David and Bill.

How has that stood the test of time through the project? Have you had to revise your plans. How have you managed that process?

HNZ has a strong body of members with experience and expertise to manage any change of plans if this occurs. HNZ decide collectively in regular weekly meetings to adopt plans if required.

HNZ felt it was critical to meet frequently, every week if possible, and share minutes of meetings.

How did you identify a funding need?

Key local organisations have been key in identifying a funding need and directed HNZ to RCEF (Phase 1 and Phase 2).

These include the Rural Design Centre, CAN (Community Action Northumberland), the Climate Action team at Northumberland County Council.

How have you managed the process of bidding for funding?

David Sill CBE led the bidding process to RCEF and formal meetings are used to agree which funding opportunities to bid for.

Did you have a need for specialist expertise for your project? If so how did you handle that and approach experts?

The first area of expertise was procuring support for the planning application and producing multiple documents to meet environmental regulations. Members HNZ had a key industry contact who was approached directly.

Secondly, HMS directly procured services from a legal firm and land agents to ensure an agreement with the site's land owner.

HNZ are now raising funding through an expert firm consultancy who support the raising of finance in renewable projects.

When possible HNZ undertook open procurement for local contractors. However, there is a small pool of contractors in the North East for constructing solar PV projects.

What have been the hardest difficulties to overcome and how did you overcome them?

The key difficulties include:

- Planning permission has suffered delays due to added archaeologist interest in the site as it is within the Hadrian's Wall Buffer Zone, despite Historic England being content with the project.
- Grid access: HNZ are struggling to understand accurate costs of connecting to the local grid and potential affordable solutions.
- Contractor shortage for constructing the project.

Overcoming these issues involves working with key partners and brokering discussions with key organisations.

Has the community managed to stay true to the original project vision? If not, why not? If it has, how has this been achieved?

There is a simple objective of achieving net zero emissions by 2030 for HNZ.

HNZ now know how much carbon the parish is generating and potential views for annual targets. This is around low carbon electricity, removing oil and gas boilers, transition from petrol and diesel to electric vehicles and increased public transport, consuming greener foods and planting more trees.

HNZ are remaining true to their vision of achieving a solar PV project to tackle this overarching objective.

What have been the biggest learnings from the delivery of your project?

- Engage the community from the outset of a project or establishing a community climate action group. A survey is a great way to achieve that, provides raw data and starts to build a consensus.
- Look into community for expertise. There are around 600-700 people in Humshaugh and people have come to the front to form HNZ.
- Following establishing a core group and project, the group need to meet regularly and keep the community onboard through newsletters, a website and public meetings.

What decisions, or elements of organisation have been the most important in the delivery of your project?

From the outset, HNZ wanted to capitalise upon any opportunity for funding and undertaking a feasibility study and options appraisal via RCEF provided unbiased information which is credible to external bodies.

Another key decision was to horizon scan for funding opportunities and work with key local partners such as Northumberland County Council, the Rural Design Centre and Community Action Northumberland (CAN).

What were the most important sources of advice and guidance for your community as you moved through the different phases of the project?

Internal expertise within HNZ was key, especially in developing funding applications. The Climate Action Team at Northumberland County Council has been invaluable in providing technical support and project guidance.

Key contact

Herbie Newell, Humshaugh Net Zero and Newcastle University
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Links

Website: <https://www.humshaughnetzero.org/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/humshaughnet0/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/humshaughnetzero/>



Inis Meáin community-owned wind turbine

 Aran Islands

This community owned energy co-operative on the Aran Islands brings residents and businesses of the three islands together to become self-sufficient in locally generated renewable energy. The non-profit Cooperative was set up in 2012 and has a board of 12 elected members who meet for an Annual General Meeting.

The co-operative is currently working towards developing a 100% community owned wind turbine on Inis Meáin and has received a grid connection offer for 650kW. This has the potential to produce significant benefits and to enable make transition to clean energy, while strengthening the local economy and sustaining the population. The co-operative is undertaking a detailed feasibility study with SEAI Technical Advisors – Plan Energy.



Interview Questions and Responses

How did you as a community agree the key objectives that you wanted your project to deliver?

The communities on the Aran Islands are self-sufficient, however the communities have never been self-sufficient in energy due to lack of natural resources and the co-operative saw an opportunity to benefit from new renewable energy technology under community ownership. Therefore, the board of the co-operative collectively agreed to pursue the development of a community owned turbine to achieve self-sufficiency of energy on Inis Meáin, one of the Aran Islands.

How did you decide upon a single project idea that could deliver against those objectives?

The co-operative wanted to establish a self-sufficient energy community and a community owned project was key to enable this objective. There was existing infrastructure and grid connection from a previous wind turbine on Inis Meáin which collectively convinced the board to pursue this single project idea.

Although the co-operative identified wind as an obvious opportunity, the co-operative is open to pursuing other forms of energy such as solar, wave and tidal, if it enables local community energy ownership.

Describe the process by which you achieved consensus around objectives and projects. Has that consensus held or does it remain challenged by some in the community? If so, how are you dealing with that?

Consensus has been gained with the communities under 10 collectively agreed objectives, which includes community energy and therefore pursuing a community-owned wind turbine aligned with these objectives. These objectives have also been revised after 10 years with input of wider community development co-operatives on the Aran Islands and from community members in an open forum.



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How did you approach planning and project management around your selected idea?

The project manager is directly appointed by the co-operative who is highly skilled and collaborates with 5 members of a subcommittee responsible for managing the community owned turbine project, which report to the Aran Islands Energy Co-operative Board. In parallel, the SEAI has supported the project by providing consultants, Plan Energy, free of charge to the Aran Islands Energy Co-operative as a registered SEC (Sustainable Energy Community).

How has that stood the test of time through the project? Have you had to revise your plans. How have you managed that process?

The SEAI provided a consultant who is developing the feasibility study on behalf of the co-operative which is still ongoing. The SEAI and co-operative have oversight of the consultants' work on an ongoing basis, however the future plan for the project is dependent upon the outcome of the feasibility study. Revising plans for the project will be collectively agreed at board level.

How did you identify a funding need?

Funding construction of community owned renewable energy projects can be secured from private or charitable sources. However, accessing funding to undertake feasibility studies to obtain planning permission stage was the key need for the co-operative.

How have you managed the process of bidding for funding?

The co-operative's project manager and board directors support the bid writing applications to secure funding and support from organisations such as the SEAI. This is a collaborative process requiring a subcommittee to report to wider board directors for approval before submission.

Did you have a need for specialist expertise for your project? If so how did you handle that and approach experts?

The SEAI created a panel of consultants and the SEAI have connected the co-operative with the consultants to undertake the feasibility study. This service is only made available to communities which are registered SECs (Sustainable Energy Communities).

What have been the hardest difficulties to overcome and how did you overcome them?

The first difficulty is generating community buy in. The co-operative hosted several public meetings at a local hall which involved selecting the turbine site and created guiding principles for selection.

The second is enabling a grid connection and exporting energy to the national grid. There was an existing connection to the shoreline and to the Irish mainland, this had to be inspected and requires repair work of around €30,000 – €40,000. Funding for this repair will be sourced following the feasibility study.

The third is ensuring enough grid capacity to take the export. Following an EirGrid assessment the max capacity is 650kw although the overall target is 2–3MW.

The fourth is securing planning permission, although there was a previous onshore turbine, the EU has designated further restriction on the environment and landscape. Therefore, there may be additional barriers to overcome to secure permission.

The co-operative is working with relevant government agencies to understand the barriers in greater depth and how to overcome them. The co-operative are open to adapt its focus upon a different renewable power such as wave or tidal or create community owned solar on buildings.

Has the community managed to stay true to the original project vision? If not, why not? If it has, how has this been achieved?

It has been difficult to stay true due to potential planning permission barriers and the outcome of the feasibility study will shape future decision-making on the project.

What have been the biggest learnings from the delivery of your project?

The key learnings for developing a community owned turbine and wider energy projects include:

- Being prepared to learn and adapt to issues which have appeared
- Willingness to learn and to potentially adapt to other forms of energy if one form of energy is not practical.
- Only pursuing projects which are feasible and have received external judgement and expertise.

What decisions, or elements of organisation have been the most important in the delivery of your project?

Establishing very high standards of governance is key and to establish trust with the community and have long-term support. The board have an item on the agenda which discusses governance, how to run the meetings, handling decision making, consulting local community members and providing transparent communication channels.

The objectives of the co-operative have to align with the community as a whole by enabling a self-sustaining community, creating clean energy related employment, improving standards of living, reinvesting into infrastructure and improving quality of living.

What were the most important sources of advice and guidance for your community as you moved through the different phases of the project?

Networking has been key to source key sources of advice and guidance. The key organisations include:

- The SEAI, which the co-operative consider has having a strong working and personal relationship.
- University of Galway.
- Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Key contact

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Links

Website: <https://www.aranislandsenergycoop.ie/>

Website (Projects): https://www.aranislandsenergycoop.ie/?page_id=635

Website (Aran Energy Projects): <http://aranenergyproject.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/AranIslandsenergy>



Mullingar Sustainable Energy Community (SEC)

Mullingar, County Westmeath

Mullingar Sustainable Energy Community was formed in 2018, supported by the Mullingar Chamber of Commerce. The group is in contact with other communities supported by the SEAI (Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland). Recently, a visit to a community-run windfarm in Templederry, County Tipperary, was hosted by Community Power. This inspired the community to see what they could achieve.

Mullingar Sustainable Energy Community is developing a 5MW community-owned solar farm on a former landfill site. The feasibility of the latter is currently being explored, supported by a €30,000 grant from LEADER via Westmeath Community Development (WCD).



Interview Questions and Responses

How did you as a community agree the key objectives that you wanted your project to deliver?

The SEAI were offering grants and free energy audits to communities in 2018. SEAI informed the Chamber of Commerce in Mullingar that the community required an SEC, which was set up with support from SEAI, alongside a subcommittee to drive projects.

The SEC and subcommittee have been key in collectively agreeing objectives for projects, based upon a Masterplan which was undertaken with consultancy support.

How did you decide upon a single project idea that could deliver against those objectives?

Members of the Mullingar SEC sub-committee wanted something concrete to focus upon and to realise a more sustainable community. The sub-committee felt the solar farm is tangible and a specific target, with members collectively agreeing.

County Westmeath has a history of developing wind farms, there have been attempts to get turbines in and there were major complaints regarding onshore wind turbines, therefore solar was the preferred route.

Describe the process by which you achieved consensus around objectives and projects. Has that consensus held or does it remain challenged by some in the community? If so, how are you dealing with that?

The 5MW solar project received little objection from the community. This was enabled by stories in the local press which have helped build a consensus, following public events delivered by Mullingar SEC.

In parallel, the SEAI acted as mentors, have been supportive and helped Mullingar SEC gain consensus with the community and within the sub-committee by outlining the clear potential benefits of solar to Mullingar.



Funded through the Just Transition Fund and the Carbon Tax Fund

How did you approach planning and project management around your selected idea?

Gerard's background is in the IT sector nationally and internationally, working as a project manager. His role is sharing information, organising meetings and driving grant applications. Alongside Gerard, there are key individuals supporting the project management.

There is a WhatsApp group with around 20 people from the Mullingar SEC to regularly share project updates and organise meetings. The sub-committee meets around once a month and undertake ad hoc meetings.

How has that stood the test of time through the project? Have you had to revise your plans. How have you managed that process?

If the project obtains planning permission and grid connection, the Mullingar SEC would then apply for RESS funding via the SEAI. The project then becomes serious and project management becomes more critical.

The SEAI has informed Mullingar SEC that funding for project management is in the next phase and the project will require a full-time project manager.

How did you identify a funding need?

The Mullingar SEC found it difficult to originally identify capital funding for projects. In response, they discussed this with key contacts at Claremorris Energy Co-operative, as they have secured funding for a solar project.

The Energy Masterplan for Mullingar, undertaken by consultants, identified funding from financial institutes and community lending organisations, however the interest rates were too high. The identification of funding from the Just Transition Fund came via support from the SEAI.

How have you managed the process of bidding for funding?

Gerard's background in project management enabled the Mullingar SEC to carefully manage the bidding process and develop funding applications.

Did you have a need for specialist expertise for your project? If so how did you handle that and approach experts?

The Mullingar SEC procured specialist consultants to develop a feasibility study for the 5mw solar farm, supported by a €30,000 LEADER grant from Westmeath Community Development Company. The procurement was undertaken through an open e-tender process.

The SEAI and Westmeath Community Development Company supported Mullingar SEC in designing and launching the open procurement process. Members of the Mullingar SEC with a strong business and financial background, had the capacity to assess the tenders.

What have been the hardest difficulties to overcome and how did you overcome them?

The key difficulty faced by the Mullingar SEC sub-committee was to be brave enough to engage with the community directly, and share the challenges with financing and planning permission, in order to get the Mullingar community on board.

The Mullingar SEC now have some models for costs which were developed with support from the SEAI and internal members. This was a key piece of information for getting the community on board.

Has the community managed to stay true to the original project vision? If not, why not? If it has, how has this been achieved?

The Mullingar SEC are taking a long-term approach and have remained true to their original vision. As an SEC, they are aiming to launch other projects such as housing retrofit.

What have been the biggest learnings from the delivery of your project?

The biggest learnings from developing the 5MW solar project are:

- Securing grid connection and engaging EirGrid to understand the best location to connect. This has been a challenging process. The Mullingar SEC have been 3 years trying to get the grid connection.
- Securing land at a good price as there are large costs associated with grid connections.
- Identifying and securing funding from sources such as LEADER.
- Mullingar SEC have registered to be a cooperative with 13 members, all contributing €100 each.

What decisions, or elements of organisation have been the most important in the delivery of your project?

Deciding to establish a concrete and tangible project is important for a community. The solar farm will give Mullingar SEC the licence to develop more projects and have credibility to do other projects.

What were the most important sources of advice and guidance for your community as you moved through the different phases of the project?

The SEAI coordinators are the most important sources of information for project development.

The Mullingar SEC have also been working with other SECs from across Ireland to better understand the concept, design and funding stages. For example, talking to Claremorris Energy Co-operative.

Key contact

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Links

Website for latest project update story: <https://mullingarsec.ie/2023/01/leader-grant-for-mullingar-solar-park-feasibility-study/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MullingarSEC/>