



**A concept paper**

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# 1. Introduction

## Background information on community energy in Northern Ireland

Despite the impressive strides in community energy across England, Scotland, and Wales, with over 360 projects in England, 300+ in Scotland, and rapid development in Wales, our region remains significantly behind in promoting, supporting, and developing community energy initiatives.

The publication of pivotal papers like 'Community Energy: Unleashing the Potential for Communities to Power Change' in 2014 and 'The Growth of Community Energy in NI' in 2020 highlighted the urgent need for collective action to foster a new approach to community energy in our region. These documents called for an enabling environment where citizens are not just consumers but active participants, advocating for democratic control and ownership of energy projects. They underscored the critical role of community-led initiatives and provided inclusive definitions of community energy.

Yet, a decade later, these visionary papers have failed to ignite the necessary interest from policymakers and communities alike, leaving the concept still nascent in 2025. This is precisely why this Concept Paper for a new Community Energy Northern Ireland represents a fresh and vital effort to rally a renewed coalition of the willing, aimed at invigorating community energy in Northern Ireland. Now is the time to transform our energy landscape and empower our communities to lead the charge.

## Why do we need a coalition of the willing?

Forming a coalition to advance community energy in Northern Ireland is essential. Collaborative action can unleash significant potential, providing a coordinated and impactful approach compared to isolated efforts. A coalition serves as a unified voice to engage policymakers, advocate for sector needs, facilitate peer-to-peer learning, share resources, and develop collective capacity. It can create a stronger narrative, raise public awareness, and address systemic barriers by negotiating with network operators and exploring innovative financial solutions. Ensuring principles of social, economic, regional, gender, and racial justice are central to the energy transition, a coalition brings together diverse skills and knowledge, benefiting smaller or emerging groups. Ultimately, a coalition enables community energy organisations to work strategically and collaboratively, contributing to a democratic, decentralized, and decarbonized energy system that benefits all the geographical communities that make up Northern Ireland.

## The four founder organisations

Currently, the coalition includes Co-operative Alternatives, Drumlin Wind Energy Co-op, NICE, and Fermanagh Trust. Over the past six months, these organisations have collaborated to develop this concept paper, proposing common values, purpose, vision, and mission for Community Energy Northern Ireland. Inspired by Community Energy England, Scotland, and Wales, as well as the developments in the South of Ireland, this coalition aims to unify the region's voice in community energy.

## 2. Purpose of Community Energy Northern Ireland

The purpose of this coalition is to create an enabling environment in Northern Ireland for the growth and success of community energy initiatives, empowering communities to actively participate in and benefit from a just transition to a democratic, decentralized, and decarbonized energy system.

### Vision

Our vision is of a Northern Ireland where community energy is a mainstream and integral part of the energy landscape, contributing significantly to achieving climate targets, strengthening local economies, enhancing community well-being, and ensuring a secure, affordable, and sustainable energy future for all its citizens. We envision a future where the people within communities are at the heart of the energy system, leading the way in energy generation, management, and use.

#### VISION

**We envision a future where the people within communities are at the heart of the energy system, leading the way in energy generation, management, and use.**

### Mission

The mission of this coalition is to unite and amplify the voices of organisations and individuals supporting community energy in Northern Ireland.

By working together, the coalition aims to unlock the full potential of community energy to power positive change across Northern Ireland.

#### MISSION

**Unite and amplify  
the voices of organisations and individuals supporting community energy.**

### Common Values

Community Energy Northern Ireland is built on several core values. These include **democratic participation and control**, ensuring local people actively lead and benefit from energy projects. It emphasizes delivering tangible social, economic, environmental, and educational benefits to empower communities and strengthen cohesion. The transition to a low-carbon future must be **just and equitable**, promoting renewable energy and efficiency to ensure no community is left behind. The energy system should be **decentralized and innovative**, moving away from large power stations and fostering new technologies and engagement models. **Transparency and accountability** are crucial, allowing communities to understand and influence energy decisions. **Sustainability and environmental responsibility** are key, with a commitment to reducing carbon emissions and promoting renewable practices. Lastly, **collaboration and partnership** among community groups, government bodies, the private sector, and other stakeholders are essential to creating a supportive ecosystem for community energy.

### 3. What is community energy?

Community energy can be defined as follows:

*Community energy* refers to **community-led initiatives** that focus on **renewable energy generation, energy efficiency, and energy supply**, wholly/partially **owned or controlled by communities**, or developed in partnership with public or private sector bodies.

Adapted from Community Energy England

Community energy is what happens when people come together to build their own solutions to the problems of our energy system, driven by motivations such as climate change, pollution reduction, environmental protection or tackling fuel poverty. It puts people at the heart of the energy system, bringing them together to take democratic climate action by understanding, generating, owning, using, and saving energy. This involves community-led renewable energy, energy demand reduction, and energy supply projects, which can be wholly owned and/or controlled by geographical communities and/or communities ‘of interest’ or through partnerships. These projects place democratic control, shared benefits, and active participation at the centre of project delivery, recognising citizens as active participants in the transition to a low-carbon economy, not just consumers. The emphasis is on local engagement, leadership, and control, with project outcomes benefiting local communities in ways that promotes sustainable living.



#### Key benefits of community energy

##### **Social**

Community energy initiatives offer numerous advantages, starting with democratic and participatory governance. These projects empower local citizens to engage directly in decision-making processes, ensuring transparency and equitable participation. For instance, community solar projects often allow members to vote on key decisions, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability.

##### **Environmental**

Decarbonization and environmental sustainability are also central benefits. Community energy projects accelerate the transition to a zero-carbon energy system by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing the use of renewable technologies. Examples include wind farms operated by local cooperatives, which significantly contribute to a cleaner environment and support the shift to a low-carbon economy.

Moreover, community empowerment and resilience are enhanced through these initiatives. Local energy projects build community confidence, resilience, and social cohesion by providing training and resources. Empowering local people and fostering pride in their communities, these projects strengthen the social fabric and autonomy of the region.

### **Economic**

Economic benefits and local development are substantial. Community-owned energy projects generate steady income streams that fund local development projects, reduce energy bills, and tackle fuel poverty. They contribute to local economies through community benefit funds and create job opportunities, providing financial returns on citizens' investments and enhancing resilience to energy price fluctuations.

Social justice and inclusivity are integral to community energy. These initiatives ensure that marginalised communities are included in the energy system, promoting social, economic, regional, gender, and racial justice. Programs targeting low-income neighbourhoods exemplify how community energy can ensure that everyone benefits from the energy transition, including the most vulnerable.

### **Educational**

Increased engagement and awareness are fostered through community energy projects. Educational workshops and public campaigns raise awareness about renewable energy and environmental issues, driving behavioural change and increasing public support. These initiatives harness people's passion and knowledge, encouraging active participation and practical action.

Innovation and system flexibility are key strengths of community energy organisations. Leading in energy system innovation, these groups adapt to changing needs by promoting decentralization and the uptake of digital technologies. Smart grid projects led by community groups illustrate how community energy can respond dynamically to evolving energy demands.

Trust and community leadership are fundamental. Community energy projects are created and run by local people who understand and address the needs of their communities. These trusted leaders enable community-driven energy systems, ensuring accountability and fostering local leadership.

Finally, energy security and self-sufficiency are enhanced through community energy. Local microgrids and other initiatives generate energy locally, providing greater control over supply and increasing energy security. These projects empower communities to manage their energy needs independently, contributing to a more resilient and self-sufficient energy system.

In summary, community energy offers a multifaceted approach to energy that goes beyond mere generation, focusing on democratic participation, local benefits, environmental sustainability, and social justice, making it a distinct and valuable part of the broader energy landscape.

## 4. Organisational Structure: a Forum

The vision for community energy suggests that a coalition of organisations should adopt **a forum** structure embodying the core principles of being democratic, decentralized, participatory, and focused on shared benefits.

Key elements of the forum include membership-based governance, where each member organisation has a defined role and voting rights based on the principle of 'one member, one vote.' This ensures participatory governance and democratic decision-making through regular meetings and transparent processes.

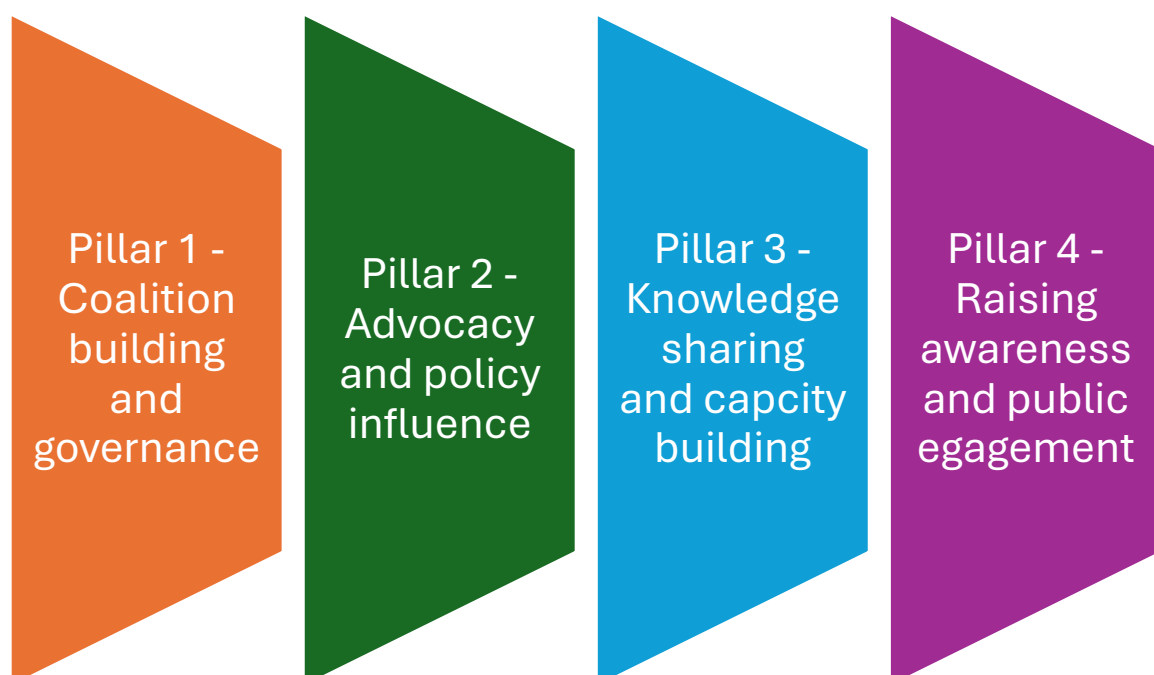
**Inclusivity and representation** are crucial, ensuring diverse organisations are represented, reflecting various histories of involvement or aspirations in aspects of community energy.

**Transparency and accountability** are essential, with clear lines of accountability to build trust and ensure the coalition acts in the best interests of its members. Adopting co-operative values, such as shared ownership and democratic control, can further emphasize these principles.

**Collaboration and knowledge sharing** are vital, with the coalition facilitating networking and resource sharing through forum meetings, roundtables, online platforms, or even joint projects in the future.

## 5. Action Plan

The overarching goal is to establish a proactive, effective, and representative Community Energy Northern Ireland to accelerate the growth and impact of community energy in the region. This initial action plan provides a comprehensive framework for the coalition's early activities, emphasizing actions that will drive progress and impact in community energy across Northern Ireland.



## Pillar 1: Coalition Building and Governance

Firstly, coalition building and governance will be prioritised. The coalition will use initial Terms of Reference. Additionally, the coalition will actively recruit a diverse range of existing and emerging community energy organisations and project types. To emphasize the benefits of collective action and shared learning, a series of roundtable events will be organised.

Effective internal communication channels will be developed to keep members informed, facilitate discussions, and coordinate activities. This will involve creating new content for the website [Home - Community Energy NI](#) and launching it.

## Pillar 2: Advocacy and Policy Influence

In terms of advocacy and policy influence, the coalition will identify key policy priorities based on current challenges and opportunities in the energy action plan. Clear and compelling advocacy materials, such as policy briefs and position papers, will be created to articulate the benefits of community energy and the coalition's policy recommendations.

Engagement with policymakers at local and central government levels will be initiated to raise awareness and advocate for supportive policies. This will involve responding to consultations, attending policy events, and building relationships with key stakeholders.

The coalition will also actively support the advocacy work of other community energy networks, such as Community Energy England, Scotland, Wales, and efforts in the South of Ireland, to amplify the local sector's voice.

## Pillar 3: Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building

Knowledge sharing and capacity building are essential for the coalition's success. A central knowledge hub will be established for members to share information, best practices, case studies, and lessons learned and connect with any useful other

To facilitate peer-to-peer learning, events will be organized, both virtually and in-person, to connect member organisations and enable them to learn from each other's experiences.

Common capacity-building needs among members will be identified, and relevant training programs and resources will be developed or curated. Successful community energy projects and business models will be highlighted and disseminated to encourage wider adoption.

## Pillar 4: Raising Awareness and Public Engagement

Raising awareness and public engagement will be a key focus. A compelling coalition narrative will be crafted to clearly articulate the vision and benefits of community energy and the coalition's role in achieving it.

Proactive engagement with media outlets and the public will be undertaken to raise awareness about community energy and the coalition's activities. This will highlight tangible benefits for communities, such as affordable bills, local economic development, and climate action.

The successes and impacts of the coalition's member organisations will be publicly promoted to demonstrate the real-world benefits of community energy. Strategies will be developed to encourage broader community participation in energy initiatives, aligning with the goal of drawing people into the energy transition.



## 6. References

List of sources and references used in the concept paper:

*'Community Energy: Unleashing the Potential for Communities to Power Change'*  
February 2014, Fermanagh Trust

*'People Power: Introduction of Community Energy'* Leaflet produced by CE England,  
Scotland, Wales and NI, 2015

*'The Growth of Community Energy in Northern Ireland'* Joint Committee on Community  
Energy Policy, October 2020

*'Community Energy Vision 2030'*, produced by Community Energy England, 2020