

Energy in Action: Community benefits from local infrastructure

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In 2023, renewables provided more power to the grid than fossil fuels at 43%.¹ This seismic shift in how we generate electricity has contributed to the UK slashing its carbon emissions by half since 1990.

Building renewable energy projects – such as solar farms and wind farms, either on land or at sea – means we must think about the communities that are affected, either temporarily during construction or by hosting critical infrastructure. There is a number of ways communities can directly benefit from hosting these projects, for example through reduced energy costs and funding local initiatives.

This case study outlines how the energy industry, including Energy UK members Community Windpower, EDF Renewables UK, National Grid, Ørsted, RES, RWE, ScottishPower Renewables, SSE Renewables and Octopus Energy, is working to ensure collaboration with communities that continually creates opportunities and growth for their local areas.

Growing local communities

Building renewable energy infrastructure, whether that be onshore wind or solar farms, can offer a variety of benefits to local communities through community benefit funds. These can help develop, create and fund activities, projects and initiatives to bolster local communities and industries.

With eight operational onshore wind farms in Scotland, two consented and one currently in planning, Energy UK member **Community Windpower** has invested more than £100,000 in the North Ayrshire Foodbank. This scheme supports the delivery of Christmas food hampers and summer school-meal campaigns. Alongside this, its defibrillator initiative, launched in 2022, has installed life-saving defibrillators and CPR training packs in six schools in the East of Scotland.²

Likewise, **National Grid's** London Power Tunnels projects has invested more than £1.8 million in a five year school engagement initiative across South London. Conducted in partnership with social enterprise Connectr, the programme has been instrumental in providing students with the necessary tools to explore and pursue careers in green and science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) focused fields. Alongside this, the programme has a significant potential economic impact, with an estimated £4.1 million contribution to economic output after three years expected through reducing the likelihood of participants aged 16 to 18 falling out of education, employment, or training.³

The Dogger Bank Wind Farm, which is being built by **SSE Renewables** as part of a joint venture with Equinor and Vårgrønn, has invested £1 million during its construction to help enhance the STEM educational experience from early years to university for young people, in three north-east local authority areas – supporting more than 36,000 young people across 204 schools and providing 62 university scholarships. The project partners will invest a further £25 million to enhance STEM education for young people during the planned 35-year operational lifespan of the wind farm, equipping them with the skills to succeed in a clean energy world.⁴

¹ [Carbon Brief \(2024\) Analysis: UK electricity from fossil fuels drops to lowest level since 1957.](#)

² [Community Windpower, Community Windpower lifesaving defibrillator initiative](#)

³ [National Grid \(2024\) National Grid's school engagement programme exceeds five-year ambition ahead of schedule by reaching over 100,000 students.](#)

⁴ [Dogger Bank Wind Farm \(2024\) Dogger Bank described as 'market leader' by community investment report author.](#)

SSE Renewables also runs the Sustainable Development Fund which has supported local community development in Scotland for 10 years. The programme invested £13.5 million in 238 projects to enhance the socio-economic prospects of local areas from building 55 community owned houses to supporting 119 local jobs and enhancing 95 community assets. The impact review showed 96% of projects funded are still operating and creating a positive difference for their communities.⁵

Elsewhere, **RWE** has invested £10,000 from its Rampion Offshore Wind Farm Fund in East Sussex. Part of this funding has assisted the development of the Brighton Bike Hub, a project working to enable members of the community to access affordable cycling while advocating for reducing waste and emissions. The Hub offers refurbished bikes, advice and support, free tools, and workshop space.⁶ These schemes are vital to supporting local communities to thrive as well as incentivising the development of much-needed low-carbon infrastructure.

Last year alone, Energy UK member **ScottishPower Renewables** contributed £7.6 million in community benefit funds to communities across the UK and, to date, has shared more than £64 million to communities close to its operational windfarms.⁷ Whitelee Windfarm's Community Benefit funding helps support the employment of two countryside rangers, who patrol the site's 130km of trails on foot, bike and vehicle, liaising with land managers and helping visitors fully enjoy and understand the natural wealth of Whitelee.

Ørsted's community benefit funds have contributed over £10m to over 700 local community projects including a £1m donation to the creation of a new Horizon youth centre in Grimsby.⁸

Strengthening skills

Community funds can also be used to enhance education in STEM. There will be hundreds of thousands of new job opportunities within the energy industry, so it is important to equip children and young adults with the necessary skills at an early stage.

As part of its commitment to supporting education and employment throughout Scotland, **Community Windpower** partners with several colleges to deliver Student Placement Schemes to young people.⁹ The placements are designed to provide students with an understanding of onshore wind as well as hands-on experience with Development and on-site Operations teams.

Likewise, Energy UK members **Ørsted** and **RWE** also invest in education and job opportunities to support host communities. Ørsted's Skills funds contribute over £275,000 every year to support Further Education Colleges and other skills institutions, and has also opened up a visitor centre at its East Coast Hub to host school visits. In 2023, the fund awarded money to the University of Hull to develop a free education Centre in Bridlington, nearby to its Hornsea 3 Offshore Wind Farm, to support disadvantaged school children in the community.¹⁰

The Brechfa Onshore Wind Farm located in Wales operated by **RWE** has contributed £74,000 to the Cynefin Schools Project, which was instigated by the community fund panel of local people, after it commissioned a piece of work to explore how they could best support their local schools. The project is an innovative approach to supporting six local primary schools with funding for additional staffing

⁵ [SSE Renewables, Sustainable Development Fund: A decade of social impact.](#)

⁶ [RWE \(2023\) Future Bright Annual Report 2023](#)

⁷ [ScottishPower Renewables \(2023\) Community Benefit Report 2023.](#)

⁸ [Ørsted, Our community grants help support local groups and organisations in the coastal regions where we construct and operate our offshore wind farms.](#)

⁹ [Community Windpower, Student Placements, Internships and Work-based Learning.](#)

¹⁰ [GrantScope \(2023\) East Coast Skills Fund Grants Awarded.](#)

costs, which have released teaching staff to work together and develop their local curriculum and experiences for these small rural schools.

RWE also operates both the Camster Wind Farm, Bad á Cheò Onshore Wind Farm in Scotland. The community funds for these sites enhance employment prospects by subsidising fees for adult training courses and education opportunities in the local and wider Caithness regional area. This aims to better equip individuals with the range of skills needed to enter or retain employment in key sectors of the local economy, including STEM, renewables, energy and climate change.¹¹

EDF Renewables UK, one of the country's leading renewable energy developers, operates 36 onshore wind farms across the UK with dedicated community funds being used for a variety of purposes by local groups and initiatives. Over £2.6million was given to communities across the UK last year from these funds.

The company's Park Spring onshore wind farm in Barnsley has funded specialised support for local people enabling them to gain the IT and employment skills they need to improve their quality of life and get back into employment.¹² Elsewhere in the North East of England, EDF Renewables UK's Blyth Offshore Demonstrator wind farm donates £10,000 per annum to the Blyth RNLI Lifeboat Station, funding life-saving equipment and enabling the volunteers to continue to save lives in the North East of England.¹³

Financial support and advice

Despite a significant fall in the price cap at the beginning of this year, millions of households still struggle to afford their energy bills, which are still a third higher than pre-crisis levels. Community funds can be vital to providing host communities with financial aid and knowledge as well as energy efficiency measures to bring down bills.

Ripple Energy offers opportunities for individuals across the country to own part of renewable energy projects, giving them back savings off their electricity bill from the energy produced. The company's wind farm in Wales, which was supported by a loan from the Welsh Government, has a community benefit fund which split its funding equally with local charity, RCT Interlink, which supports well-being activities to help avoid households going into fuel poverty, and the rest goes to the Fuel Bank Foundation which helps households in fuel crisis.¹⁴

SSE Renewables offers similar support as part of its Thurso Community Energy Support Training Programme which gives training to community-based staff and volunteers throughout the Highlands and equips them to identify residents who may be experiencing issues and signpost residents to further support.¹⁵

Alongside this, SSE Renewables also runs the Highland Energy Efficiency Programme which provides energy efficiency measures including solar, battery, air source heating and insulation to households in extreme fuel poverty. To this date, the Programme has enabled 250 households to have warmer and more efficient homes with plans to increase support and investment.

¹¹ [RWE \(2023\) Future Bright Annual Report 2023.](#)

¹² [South Yorkshire's Community Foundation, Park Spring Wind Farm Community Benefits Fund.](#)

¹³ [RNLI Lifeboats \(2019\) EDF Renewables UK agree to support Blyth RNLI.](#)

¹⁴ [Ripple Energy, Derril Water Solar Park.](#)

¹⁵ [SSE \(2023\) Community Investment Review.](#)

Meanwhile, research by **Octopus Energy** shows that 87% of people would support a turbine in their community if it decreased bills¹⁶ - and the huge demand for the company's 'Fan Club' tariff proves an increase in public support.

The Fan Club gives customers money off their bills when they use clean, local, renewable energy. It offers up to 50% off the customer's unit rate when their local wind turbine is spinning.¹⁷ One customer in Yorkshire notes that being a member of the Fan Club has not only saved them money on their bills, but it has also made them more energy aware.

Likewise, **RES** has been running its Local Electricity Discount Scheme (LEDS) for over 10 years which offers an annual discount on the electricity bills of households, businesses and public buildings closest to participating wind farms. The scheme is not linked to any particular supplier or tariff and can be administered to all energy suppliers. The company has issued over £6.5 million in the scheme so far, which has benefited over 30,000 homes.¹⁸

Energy in action

To reach our 2050 Net Zero target, the UK will need to continue its development of low-carbon, homegrown energy infrastructure. Communities play a critical role in this transition and it is important to assess and prioritise the needs of the communities that host these vital projects.

This case study has just a few examples of the ways that communities have benefitted from local infrastructure, but there are many more examples of how the energy transition benefits people across the country. If you have a case study showcasing your efforts to decarbonise homes, transport and businesses across the UK, please get in touch via press@energy-uk.org.uk.

¹⁶ [UK Parliament \(2023\) Written evidence submitted by Octopus Energy](#)

¹⁷ [Octopus Energy, Welcome to the Octopus Fan Club.](#)

¹⁸ [RES \(2021\) Our LEDS journey 10 years on – what is the key to our success?](#)