REGEN

William Grant Foundation

Building blocks

Developing community capacity for a just transition

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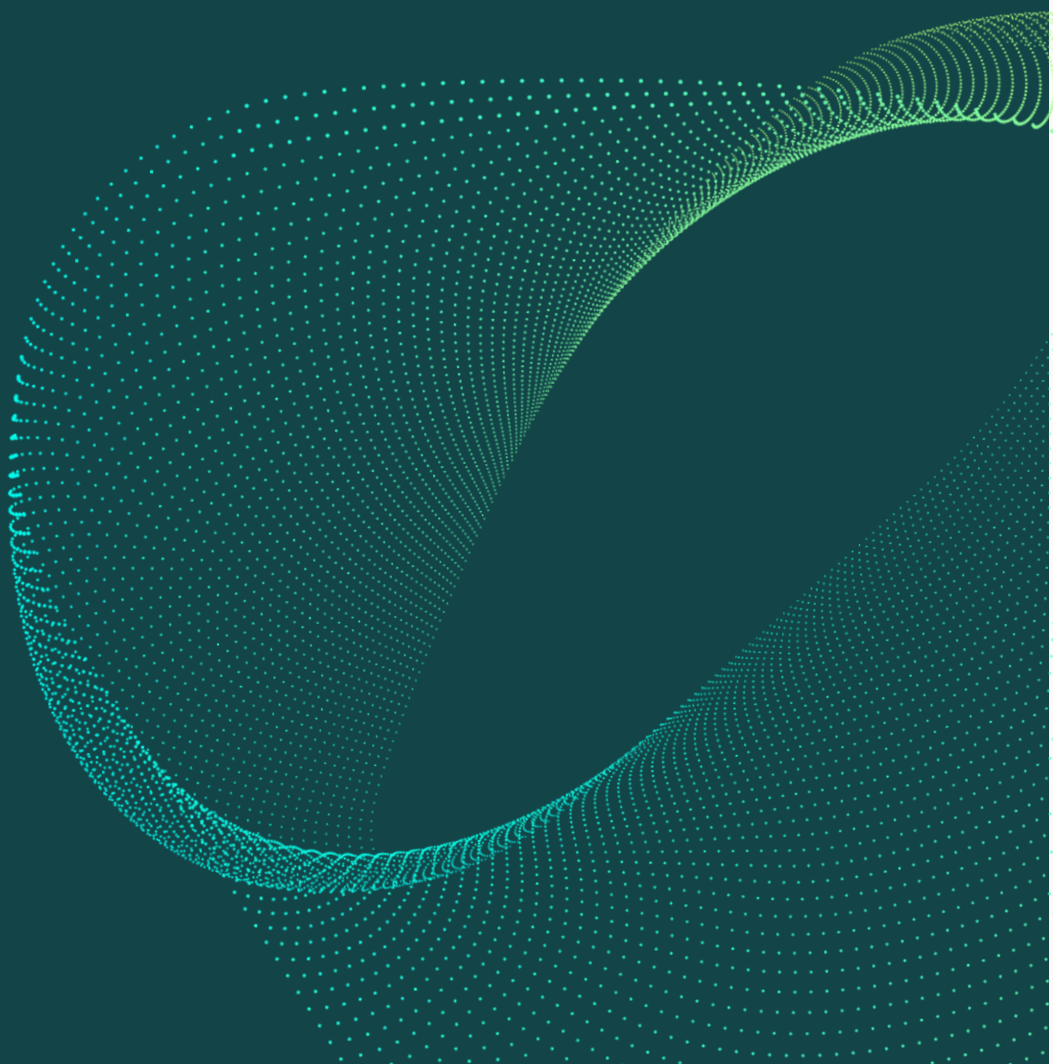

About the William Grant Foundation

The William Grant Foundation has an enduring commitment to helping Scotland thrive. We believe the scale of the climate threat – and the scale of the solutions needed – make it an issue for all parts of civil society, including foundations like ours. We recognise that people who are disadvantaged, marginalised and in poverty stand to be most affected by the direct impacts of extreme weather and nature loss as well as the effects of policies designed to help mitigate them. Our grant-making focuses on the resilience and empowerment of people in this situation and funds work that gives them more influence over decisions that affect their lives.

About Regen

Regen provides independent, evidence-led insight and advice in support of our mission to transform the UK's energy system for a net zero future. We focus on analysing the systemic challenges of decarbonising power, heat and transport. We know that a transformation of this scale will require engaging the whole of society in a just transition.

Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

In Scotland and across the UK, there is a growing understanding that communities will play a crucial role in the clean energy transition. Whether community-owned wind and solar farms, community-led retrofit and energy efficiency programmes or local advice services, there is real scope for communities to drive net zero action in a way that unlocks extensive social and economic benefits and reflects the distinct needs of local people and places – particularly those most disadvantaged, excluded and marginalised.

Understanding and building capacity among communities will be crucial to unlocking this role at scale.

'Capacity' refers to the collective ability of a community to create, lead and take advantage of opportunities from decarbonisation and clean energy. This includes the people, organisations, skills, expertise, financial resources and procedural support to make projects happen in practice.

Communities generally rely on motivated, knowledgeable and resourced volunteers to drive forward energy action such as community-owned energy and local retrofit programmes. This means that more affluent communities are generally better placed to capitalise on the opportunities of such initiatives, while those with fewer resources and experiencing socioeconomic challenges are more likely to be excluded.

Leveraging community capacity for a just transition will mean understanding the distinct capacity challenges – and opportunities – faced by lower-income and marginalised communities and tackling them in practice. This research unpacks this issue.

Through research and direct engagement with organisations that have overcome capacity challenges to deliver community-led energy action in their own areas, we identify the 'key features' of communities with capacity and the limiting factors to address in order to unlock these in more places. We then make policy recommendations for the Scottish government, UK government and GB Energy to enable this at scale.

Key messages

- Low-income and marginalised communities often have lower levels of technical energy or net zero-specific expertise, with limited individual capacity to lead or shape community-led energy action.
- However, there are often other forms of community capacity, such as existing non-energy social enterprises or charities, which can help inform and shape community-led net zero action – provided such initiatives can enable community needs and ambitions.
- Proactive awareness-raising, both nationally and locally, is crucial to promoting the opportunity of community-level net zero action and encouraging more individuals and organisations to bring projects forward. This includes targeting communities directly, via structured mapping and engagement processes, as well as through local authorities, charities and businesses.
- Multi-year capacity funding, including staff costs, is required to allow communities to build expertise, engage locally and develop the skills to lead decarbonisation projects and support the delivery of national net zero initiatives.

Principles for effective capacity building

Beyond these key messages, a set of principles emerged through this engagement which should guide the development of any capacity-building programme, to ensure that it works directly for a diverse range of communities and not just those with existing knowledge, appetite or experience:

- **Targeted at areas with the most need:** Mapping should be used to identify areas, organisations and networks that lack the time, resources and organisational support to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the energy transition.
- **Community-led:** Any capacity-building programme should be guided by communities' needs and aspirations, based on meaningful engagement with those from lower-income and marginalised backgrounds and understanding of the local context.
- **Long-term and flexible:** Building capacity takes time. Funding for capacity building should enable longer-term processes and be flexible to community experience, while providing clear milestone-based guidance to help structure activities.

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Introduction

Communities will have a critical role to play in the clean power transition, unlocking unique social and economic value, building community wealth and shaping a net zero future that works for their distinct local needs and ambitions. Reflecting this, Great British Energy has made a commitment to deliver 1,000 local and community energy projects, while the Scottish government has a long-standing commitment to achieving 2GW in the same timeframe.[1, 2]

Many communities are also thinking beyond power generation, working with partners such as local authorities to deliver support to those in fuel poverty, enable community-led retrofit and transform local economies to become more democratic and inclusive overall. Extensive evidence shows that greater community participation and leadership can reap significant social, economic and environmental benefits – including a more just and inclusive net zero process – while also building greater public buy-in for net zero.[3, 4, 5]

However, against a backdrop of austerity, the rising cost of living and the energy crisis, many communities today lack the capacity to capitalise on opportunities to deliver their own energy initiatives and on the value these have to offer. People in low-income and marginalised communities often face distinct social and economic pressures in their daily lives which make it challenging to engage with technical energy issues or to voluntarily manage complex projects. The energy crisis in particular exposed deep inequalities within the energy market, disproportionately harming people on low incomes and those experiencing wider vulnerabilities, placing many at an even greater disadvantage.[6, 7]

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[1] Great British Energy, 2025. Strategic Plan

[2] Scottish Government, 2025. Climate Change Plan: monitoring report 2025.

[3] E. Morrison, S. Theminimulle, T. Carregha, 2024, Our journey to net zero: Understanding household and community participation in the UK's transition to a greener future,

[4] F. Stewart, R. Ford, P. Sumaria, R. Evans, 2024, Leveraging local and community energy for a just transition in Scotland

[5] G. Walker, P. Devine-Wright, 2008, Community renewable energy: What should it mean?

[6] National Energy Action and Energy Action Scotland, 2022. The hardest hit: Impact of the energy crisis.

[7] New Economics Foundation, 2022. The Unequal Impacts of the Energy Bill Crisis.

Likewise, third-sector organisations remain overstretched and under-resourced, often stuck firefighting more immediate social, health and economic issues in their local areas. Community social and leisure spaces are struggling with ongoing cuts and increased energy costs, while local authorities are facing limited budgets.[8, 9]

Pockets of exceptional work exist, challenging the stereotype that community-led energy initiatives are purely the remit of more affluent rural areas. Community-owned solar projects have been developed on council estates in north-east London, generating income to save people money on bills and fund local needs; retrofit schemes are running in Manchester and Glasgow; a heat network connecting community-owned hydropower to local homes is being developed in Tanygrisiau in Wales; while community organisations have provided critical social infrastructure for people in fuel poverty, with Plymouth Energy Community alone reaching over 1,500 households just in 2024.[10,11,12,13,14]

Yet capacity on the ground – in terms of money, legal and technical expertise, local anchor networks and administrative support on energy issues – varies significantly from place to place. There is a risk that less affluent and more marginalised communities – those most impacted by rising bills, cost-of-living pressures and wider austerity – may not be able to participate in and benefit from community-owned renewables or community-led transitions on a meaningful scale.[15] This likewise limits the ability of such organisations and communities to support the delivery of national and local decarbonisation goals.

To ensure the energy transition benefits these communities directly and supports a just transition, there is a clear need to build local capacity, enabling them to lead, co-create and deliver clean energy solutions tailored to their needs and ambitions. This work examines the key features that enable a community to develop its own energy transition project, drawing on the experiences of communities that have already done so. It proposes recommendations to the government on how to build this capacity to support a more inclusive and just transition overall.

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[8] NCVO, 2025, The Road Ahead 2025

[9] Local Government Information Unit, 2023, The state of local government finance in Scotland

[10] Repowering London, 2020, Banister House Solar Report

[11] People Powered Retrofit, November 2025, Four Years of People Powered Retrofit

[12] Loco Home Retrofit, 2025, Loco Home Retrofit

[13] Ramboll, May 2025, Tanygrisiau Gwynedd Community Heat Network

[14] Plymouth Energy Community, PEC in Action

[15] F.Hanke, R.Guyet, M.Feenstra, 2021, Do renewable energy communities deliver energy justice? Exploring insights from 71 European cases

Definitions

Within this work, the terms '**capacity'**, '**community'** and '**community-led energy action'** are used as primary concepts. Each of these can be nebulous, so our working definitions (based on literature review and stakeholder engagement) are set out below.

Capacity

'Capacity' refers to the collective ability of a community to create, lead and take advantage of opportunities from decarbonisation and clean energy. There is an expectation that this capacity provides for greater self-sufficiency within communities, and some degree of control over social, environmental and economic futures.[16]

Our research identifies that community capacity typically varies across five key dimensions:

Figure 1. Five dimensions of community capacity [17,18]

[16] L. Littlejohns, N. Bradley Smith, 2001, Shaking out the Cobwebs: Insights into Community Capacity and its Relation to Health Outcomes

[17] L. Middlemiss, B.D Parrish, 2009, Building Capacity for low-carbon communities: The role of grassroots initatives

[18] R. McMaster, B. Noble, G. Poelzer, 2024, Assessing local capacity for community appropriate sustainable energy transitions in northern and remote Indigenous communities

Table 1 outlines how high and low-capacity communities may vary along these key dimensions. These criteria are not exhaustive – most communities will sit somewhere in the middle.

Table 1. How capacity may vary across dimensions

Capacity dimension	High capacity	Low capacity
Organisational	Established, well-resourced community energy or development trust organisations with a track record in delivering community-led projects	Few or no community organisations; organisations which exist have limited resource or direct energy experience
Personal	Individuals in a community with understanding, appetite and time to participate in community projects (either as paid staff or volunteering)	Few or no individuals with time or relevant expertise, facing distinct or additional socioeconomic challenges
Knowledge and skills	Individuals or organisations that understand technical, legal, financial and administrative elements of project delivery and decarbonisation	Few or no individuals or organisations with these expertise
Cultural or social	Communities with strong networks and partnerships between individuals, community organisations and the public sector	Communities experiencing challenges of social isolation, with siloed groups working on disparate issues
Institutional	Well-resourced local government and public sector backed by a supportive national policy environment, with clear local decarbonisation strategies including the role of community partnerships	Budget-constrained public sector, working independently of local communities, with limited understanding of community partnerships or opportunities

It is also critical to distinguish between capacity for community-led clean energy initiatives and capacity more widely. In many communities, often in less affluent places, there are many longstanding organisations working on non-energy issues such as child poverty, food banks or community growing, but without energy or decarbonisation expertise. In this case, a community

may have high general capacity but may need support or additional services to leverage this for energy-related issues, provided it is appropriate for their own needs based on engagement and outreach (see Deep understanding of community networks, assets and aspirations).

Community

The definition of 'community' has been discussed extensively in literature. Here, we are largely considering 'Communities of Place'; groups defined by their geographic location.[19] For energy-specific initiatives, the 'community' can then be further specified by who develops and runs the initiative, where it is located, and who it benefits socially, economically and environmentally.[Error! Bookmark not defined.]

Community-led energy action

Community-led energy action or initiatives can take various forms. For this work, we focus on initiatives that can be feasibly led by communities themselves.[20,21] This includes, but is not limited to:

- Renewable electricity generation, including shared ownership
- Low-carbon heating, such as supporting household decarbonisation
- Energy efficiency and fuel poverty advice
- Local retrofit schemes, including the installation of low-carbon technologies
- Low-carbon transport solutions, e.g. EV charging hubs and car clubs
- Flexibility and local energy trading projects
- Community-led decarbonisation plans
- Supporting or participating in engagement and delivery of national or local net zero initiatives.

Across these initiatives, a range of different business models, organisational structures and participant and beneficiary bases exist.[22,23] This report focuses on the collective ability of a community to lead on any of the above, recognising that while some projects may be more technically complex or burdensome, the core features of capacity remain broadly the same.

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[19] C. Walker, G. Poelzer, R. Leonhardt et. Al, 2022, COPs and 'robbers?' Better understanding community energy and toward a Communities of Place then Interest approach

[20] Local Energy Scotland, 2025, Projects index

[21] Community Energy Scotland, 2025, Resources

[22] G. Sefyang, S. Hielscher, T. Hargreaves, et.al, 2014, A grassroots sustainable energy niche? Reflections on community energy in the UK

[23] T. Bauwens, D. Schraven, E. Drewing et.al, 2022, Conceptualizing community in energy systems: A systematic review of 183 definitions

Methodology

Three key initial questions were established as the basis for this work:

1. What are the **key features** of a local community that has sufficient capacity to effectively engage with and lead on clean energy initiatives, particularly in lower-income areas?
2. What are the **current capacity challenges** for communities to engage with and lead on clean energy initiatives, particularly in lower-income areas?
3. **What needs to happen to address these capacity issues**, at a regional, devolved and central government level?

To answer these questions, we used a combination of comprehensive literature review and in-depth online interviews with key stakeholders across Scotland, including third-sector and charitable organisations, local authorities, policymakers and energy sector experts.

The 10 interviews featured up to 14 questions that were tailored to each interviewee and centred around the initial questions outlined above. The intention was to interview and gain insight from individuals and organisations that:

- Have deep experience in the Scottish decarbonisation landscape, and of community-level action
- Have experience of working with lower-income and marginalised communities
- Are relevant policy and decision makers
- Have extensive experience around capacity building.

To capture this range of experience, three main categories of organisations were targeted for engagement:

- **Third-sector and charitable organisations**, including local organisations with energy knowledge, non-energy specific organisations and sector-wide energy organisations
- **Policymakers and key industry players**, including Distribution Network Operators
- **Energy sector experts and academics**.

The insights garnered from the hour-long interviews inform the findings and recommendations of this work. Where appropriate, specific insights have been attributed to individuals or organisations.

2 Key features of a community with capacity

What exactly enables a community to engage with and initiate clean energy projects in their area, particularly in lower-income and marginalised areas? What are some of the hallmarks of successful projects?

Despite a challenging policy and economic environment, many communities have continued to develop and lead their own clean energy initiatives, largely driven by passionate groups of local volunteers and activists, with support from local organisations, intermediaries such as Community Energy Scotland (and England and Wales), Local Energy Scotland, the Development Trust Association and local councils. This has painted a new picture of how the energy system might be democratised and decentralised, with community wealth and resilience at its core. How these initiatives are defined, who they involve and who they benefit vary widely. Most are uniquely shaped by their locality.

Key foundations for success can be drawn from projects that effectively involve and benefit a wide range of their community, and in particular enable participation or leadership from those who are more typically excluded from local and community energy initiatives.

These key features are synthesised from conversations with organisations and individuals already leading the way on grassroots work that has been building capacity within their local community, and from literature examining the success of groups in this space. They are intrinsically linked to each other, and collectively impact a community's capacity for community-led energy action.

Figure 2. Key features of a community with the capacity to lead and participate in clean energy initiatives

Sufficient personal capacity

At present, community-scale action on energy tends to be initiated by individuals with a particularly strong vision and determination to drive a project through, and an awareness of the opportunity that community energy provides. While community-led energy projects almost always include a range of people and organisations, stakeholders outline that these are often principally driven by an individual, or individuals, with a particular passion and understanding of both energy issues and local networks and needs. Having these 'champions' can be critical to the success of projects, particularly when they have sufficient financial, logistical and managerial resources to lead an initiative, or access to support programmes that can develop this.[24]

Motivated individuals are crucial to achieving buy-in from the local community and enabling others to participate.[25] Trusted, local individuals or organisations can help to engage

[24] R. McMaster, B. Noble, G. Poelzer, Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews, 2024, Assessing local capacity for community appropriate sustainable energy transitions in northern and remote Indigenous communities

[25] A. Ghorbani, L. Nascimento, T. Filatova, Energy Research and Social Science, 2020, Growing community energy initiatives from the bottom up: Simulating the role of behavioural attitudes and leadership in the Netherlands

community members who otherwise may be reluctant to engage with such initiatives. This has been recognised in other policy areas, such as health, where 'community champions' were noted to add unique value in being able to engage communities that "have previously been perceived to be invisible".[26]

Our research identified areas of **key individual expertise** that are particularly useful in creating and sustaining community-led energy action:[Error! Bookmark not defined., 49, 27]

- The ability to **knowledge-share and translate technical information** for community members
- The ability to adjust expectations and seek initial financial support
- The ability to **mobilise existing local networks** and organisations and motivate a broader community around a cause
- Existing **energy-related skillsets**, or transferable skills (such as project management)
- **Knowledge of bureaucracy and regulatory structures**, particularly for groups looking to develop community-owned renewable energy and connect to the grid
- The ability to **act as a mediator** between the interests of the community, the group leading the project and wider partners
- Individual expertise around **bidding for money and developing project proposals**, being able to understand institutional language and pitch a project in this context
- The ability to **integrate project thinking across areas beyond electricity**, into transport and heat and other areas that may be relevant to the community
- The **time and financial capacity** to pursue energy-related training. [24]

The level of resource and the types of skills vary depending on the opportunities the community might be pursuing. For a legally complex opportunity like shared ownership, very high capacity is needed in terms of paid staff and knowledge of how to navigate potentially complex negotiations.[28] The expertise required also varies, particularly if the group is undertaking fuel poverty or energy advice work, which requires a significant investment of time and emotions working with individuals and households.

While these skills and expertise are essential to successful community-led energy action, not every community needs to have all the above skills in-house to get started. **Experienced organisations, such as community energy groups and intermediaries, can provide a lot of this expertise where it does not already exist.** Organisations like Local Energy Scotland, Community Energy Scotland and the Development Trust Association are well known, while

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[26] H. Gilbert, L. Lamming, D. Buck, 2024, Commissioning community champions: lessons from a pandemic community champions: lessons from a pandemic

[27] L. Middlemiss, B.D. Parrish, Energy Policy, 2010, Building capacity for low-carbon communities: The role of grassroots initiatives

[28] Scottish Community Coalition on Energy, 2024, A Fair Energy Deal for Scotland: Increasing Uptake of Community Shared Ownership Opportunities

experienced community energy organisations often work with newly established ones to help them build capacity. Support can also come from proactive local authorities, who can lend their in-house expertise to support developing organisations.

For instance, Glasgow Community Energy has been actively promoting knowledge-sharing, mentorship and hands-on support to others across the city, while the Energy Learning Network pairs experienced organisations with newer ones to help share learnings, insights and expertise. This is a good example of platforming and disseminating best practice; easily accessible case studies and project information can provide helpful direction to projects starting out.

'Champion' individuals and organisations require time, support and resources to lead community initiatives effectively.[29] Often, those individuals or organisations who may be well-placed to lead on a local energy initiative lack the direct technical, legal or procedural knowledge of energy to effectively deliver this role. Many put their reputation on the line to deliver positive local change, representing a significant personal and professional investment. In lower-income areas, they may also be operating with limited resources, faced with pressing social and economic challenges.

An additional challenge is that volunteers can be transient, often moving on from projects due to life changes or circumstances restricting their free time. This volunteerism also inhibits participation from less financially secure individuals who may not be able to afford to offer their time for free. For these reasons, it is crucial that any capacity-building scheme which seeks to enable a community to lead their own energy projects includes dedicated support for the more technical, legal or financial elements.

A strong ecosystem of community organisations and intermediaries

A supportive network of community organisations representing diverse community members is often an essential part of project success. These community organisations can play a key role in stimulating and facilitating the emergence of grassroots initiatives that work for community needs. Those which are well-established and have some ongoing resource, even non-energy focused, can help to realise clean energy opportunities which directly meet community need. A good example of this is Radio City Association, where a longstanding local wellbeing charity

[29] Common Wealth, 2025, The Public Is Enthusiastic for Community Energy

pivoted to develop its own community-owned wind turbine, generating revenue and social value for a former mining area in North Ayrshire's Garnock Valley.

Case study: Radio City

This project was born out of an ambition to redevelop a former cinema in Kilbirnie as a 'healthy living centre', and to enable broader community-led regeneration. £2.5 million was raised and the renovated centre was in operation for almost 15 years before the building was sold to one of the tenants. In the wake of this, and having become an established part of the local community, the charity decided to carry on its mission but pivot towards developing renewable energy resources as a way of making its operation more self-sustaining and less reliant on grant funding.

Aware of considerable water and wind resource in the area, the group brought forward the idea of an 'Electric Valley' project; an overall strategy to increase resilience in the Garnock Valley, supported by community ownership of renewable energy. This included the proposed purchase of a wind turbine and a 1 MW hydro scheme, which would in turn support an active travel hub, community engagement, and employment, sports and wellbeing projects.[30]

The project's success has been enabled by the nearly two decades of work that the organisation had already put into its community and into building connections with other local organisations. This track record not only meant that community trust was well established, but it also engendered trust for prospective funders.

Community organisations

Third-sector organisations, including social justice and community development organisations, fuel poverty charities, mutual aid initiatives and faith groups, are crucial for engaging and building capacity for community-led initiatives. This is especially true for bringing lower-income and more marginalised groups into local and community energy projects, supporting engagement and outreach with often-excluded community members and playing an important advocacy role for their views.[4] **Having an organisation that is already well established with the community and understands its social, economic and cultural nuances prior to project inception was noted by several stakeholders as highly important to successful, inclusive community-led energy initiatives.** Carbon Coop and the Low Carbon Hub are good examples of independent organisations that can fill a valuable gap between the community and local

[30] Radio City Association, 2025, Our Story

authorities, being impartial and embedded in their local area while maintaining positive local authority relationships.

Community-led energy initiatives are more likely to succeed when supported by other local organisations and partnerships. While there is typically a 'lead' individual or organisation in a community-led energy initiative, such projects benefit from partnerships with other interested organisations – particularly where they have complimentary skills or reach. In this way, those interested in developing community-led energy projects can draw upon additional organisational capacity from other supportive groups, especially those well embedded in local knowledge-sharing networks (i.e. those who are part of other partnerships or networks).[24, 27] Having a broad church of partnerships also enables a unified voice on community development and capacity, extending beyond the lens of energy, and representing diverse social and economic perspectives. This builds stronger networks capable of pursuing strategic ambitions.

There is interest among non-expert organisations in developing their own community energy projects, but short-term funding and limited resources make it challenging to upskill in a new area. For low-income and marginalised communities, it is often the case that there are no obvious expert energy organisations, but strong capacity among organisations working on other issues, such as child poverty, local sports facilities or sustainable growing. As many third-sector, community and charitable organisations have to compete for funding, typically on an annual basis, it's challenging to take on longer-term projects with any certainty of future delivery. Because many of these organisations are stretched in resources and budget, often dealing with highly complex and pressing social issues, it is also challenging to upskill in the energy space.

Intermediary organisations

Intermediary organisations who specialise in community-led energy initiatives are critical to enabling communities and non-expert organisations to deliver their own projects. These include organisations such as Local Energy Scotland, Community Energy Scotland, the Development Trust Association, Climate Action Hubs, Net Zero Hubs and large, experienced community energy organisations. These intermediaries can be critical to raising awareness and providing hands-on procedural support to source funding, navigate negotiations, build capacity and manage project delivery. Some of these organisations carry out foundational developmental work which plays a crucial role in building an individual or community's personal, cultural and knowledge-based capacity. This work acts as a vital precursor to further community-led action, particularly in areas of wide diversity, lower-income and greater marginalisation. [31] Several stakeholders highlighted that, without intermediary support, their project may not have succeeded.

[31] Community Development Alliance, 2008, What community development does

There is a noted lack of flexible resource among intermediary organisations, with often overlapping or disjointed remits. Many intermediary organisations must work to a specific agenda set by funding from government, or rely on project-based funding, which can mean there is limited space to proactively identify and support capacity development in new or different places – particularly over longer timeframes. This lack of resource can also make capturing and tracking project impact and learnings particularly challenging. There is a noted need for greater resources (e.g. technical officers at a more granular local level) to help develop projects in communities facing additional social and economic challenges.

> *"We have the policies, we have the drive... but there's a huge gap in the middle in terms of how that's translated."*
>
> **– Francesca Lynch, Scottish Community Development Centre**

More experienced community energy organisations can also serve as intermediaries, often providing valuable support to neighbouring communities. Organisations such as Glasgow Community Energy and Repowering London have supported neighbouring communities to develop new projects, in some cases providing the direct procedural and technical support required. Elsewhere, experienced organisations have developed projects in entirely new places, establishing locally led governance and benefit structures to ensure that new communities can still benefit without necessarily leading projects themselves. While this model is useful, without a strong portfolio of projects generating consistent revenue, more experienced community energy organisations may struggle to fulfil this function at scale.

Local authorities

Local authorities can be a key player for developing community capacity. With some institutional capacity, access to funding and their own energy plans, local authorities hold resources that can help develop capacity and get community-led (or community partnership) projects moving. Given that they often also own land and buildings that may be suitable for community generation projects, this often proves a vital relationship to develop. With their links to wider local stakeholders, including academic institutions, health and social services and similar anchor organisations, local authorities can serve as a lynchpin for more ambitious community wealth-building approaches. For example, through energy efficiency improvements and bill reduction in social housing, local authorities can have a material impact on the financial capacity of individuals in the community.

There is often appetite among local authorities to support community-led energy projects but limited direct expertise in practise. Increasingly, they are seeking ways to enable community-led energy projects in their areas, recognising the value that community leadership

can deliver for inclusive engagement and the wider social benefits of decarbonisation projects.[32]

However, local authorities also face resourcing challenges, while many may not have the dedicated staff or expertise to support community-led initiatives. This can make it difficult for local authorities to support with identifying opportunities for funding or developing capacity and establishing formal working partnerships with local community organisations. Even having a comprehension of what capacity already exists within an area can be challenging. Some stakeholders also note that local authorities can be risk-averse in their procurement and delivery processes, making them sceptical towards working with community partners on new investments or programmes (particularly those that may involve financial or legal agreements, e.g. delivering retrofits or renting public roof space for community solar).

Case study: Plymouth Energy Community

Plymouth Energy Community (PEC) delivers a suite of projects across generation, community outreach, fuel poverty and facilitating broader discussions around energy and the climate.

PEC is part of a wider system of more than a hundred local partners with reciprocal relationships that form an integrated voice on community development. These comprise different organisations and taskforces, spanning academics, public organisations, social housing providers, public health providers, landlords, DNOs and gas networks. PEC's work focuses not just on its own projects, but the managing and nurturing of this ecosystem to be as effective as possible.

An essential component has been the development of its relationship with Plymouth City Council. The pair have built a deep cooperation, helped by PEC team members who previously worked for the council. This relationship has required capacity in and of itself to develop and maintain, with resource needed on both sides.

PEC has grown to become a prime example of a diverse, integrated community organisation, building capacity both within its own range of projects and across sectors in the community space.

[32] Regen, 2024, Power of Places, A vision for local energy in the UK

Deep understanding of community networks, assets and aspirations

'Good' engagement is a vital aspect of understanding a community's needs and priorities. It is also crucial for building capacity among and between individuals for more direct participation in local clean energy initiatives.

Good engagement is about working with communities to understand their needs and ambitions, as opposed to 'educating' them or prescribing a solution. One of the key themes from interviewees was that **successful projects acknowledged the embedded wisdom and knowledge of place that members of a local community have about their own context, history, challenges and ambitions.**

Individuals or organisations from outside a community may find their projects meet resistance if they do not first work to build some understanding of that community, its people and its social, economic and cultural context. This can be especially challenging in communities with distinct social and economic issues, who may also be less trusting of government institutions or expert 'outsiders'.

> *"[There is a] skillset that lies in specifically migrant communities where people have come with so much [in terms of] qualifications and experience and knowledge, and there's always these assumptions that these communities are uneducated."*
>
> **– Zarina Ahmad, University of Manchester**

There is a need to work from an 'asset-based' perspective when engaging communities, although there are limited processes for doing this consistently. One stakeholder, experienced in community wealth-building and project development, noted that it is vital to understand which organisations, knowledge, skills and projects already exist in a community to allow those administering capacity-building schemes to more effectively target outreach, support and initial engagement.

This can be developed through deep, meaningful engagement with community members before proposing new project ideas. This takes time and resources to do effectively, which stakeholders note is not currently readily available, particularly for more sensitive engagement with lower-income and marginalised communities who have been less engaged in such

conversations so far.[33] New methodologies are emerging to help map and identify community capacity, which could be leveraged to first understand the key stakeholders, organisations and background of different places before contact is made (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

> *"Working with people from an asset-based place rather than a deficit [is crucial], because if people are made to feel crap every time they come along to something, they're not going to do it."*
>
> **– Ellie Radcliffe, Carbon Co-op**

[33] F. Hanke, R. Guyet, M. Feenstra, 2021, Do renewables energy communities deliver energy justice? Exploring insights from 71 European cases

Case study: Mapping community capacity

As part of Innovate UK's Net Zero Living Programme, Regen worked with three local authorities to help quantify and identify community capacity in their areas. This process would enable them to develop a full picture of community stakeholders in their areas, supporting just transition partnership building, engagement and investment decisions on climate and net zero programmes.

To do this, Regen developed an automated web scraper, to identify all community-level organisations within the local authority area. These were then categorised based on relevance to climate and net zero issues through a 'tier' system. Tier 1 organisations are those working directly on climate, energy or net zero already, such as fuel poverty charities or sustainability organisations. Tier 2 are those working on adjacent issues who could feasibly support engagement, or whose activities could benefit from local authority-supported decarbonisation programmes – for example, food banks and social justice charities. Tier 3 is everyone else.

Regen then worked with the local authority and community organisations to iterate, refine and verify this list, including more information on each organisation type, size and roles where feasible. From there, capacity (modelled as organisation per capita) was mapped against socioeconomic and climate indicators. This mapping exercise allowed local authorities to understand which communities were affected by climate or net zero plans, where capacity may be able to be leveraged for partnership and engagement on these plans, and where additional support may be required to develop capacity to ensure marginalised communities were not excluded in the process.

While developed with local authorities, community capacity mapping can be easily implemented by other organisations, such as national or devolved government, GB Energy, or other local authorities.

Successful engagement also requires a challenging of the idea that lower-income and more marginalised communities are inherently 'harder to reach'. Such communities may be more difficult to engage with due to the additional time that may be required to identify and contact them, inaccessibility of energy and climate language, and issues of trust with external or public organisations. Yet rather than hard-to-reach, these communities are often simply 'hardly reached', with the time and effort required to build trusted relationships rarely spent.[34]

In areas where there is an established anchor organisation, such as a faith centre or well-known fuel poverty charity, participation from more marginalised communities can be very strong. Such organisations are often trusted by typically excluded groups and can serve as advocates

[34] J.Singh, 2017, Not 'hard to reach' but 'hardly reached'

on their behalf in more technical or strategic discussions about future community projects and ambitions. **This emphasises the need for capacity-building schemes to fully understand existing organisations and networks within a target community, and to expand work with wider community organisations to maximise opportunities for participation and benefit among lower-income and more marginalised groups.**

Case study: Oldham Energy Futures

Oldham Energy Futures was a partnership between Oldham Council, the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), Carbon Co-op, University College London and Urbanism, Environment and Design (URBED). The team worked with the communities of Westwood and Sholver in a participative process that enabled residents to give their opinion on how the energy transition should look in their local area, and to build skills to benefit from new opportunities in the low-carbon sector.[35]

The group tested and shaped plans and projects that would transform their neighbourhood and energy system. The result, after 18 months, was two Community-Led Energy Plans, which established the local context of each area and the communities' priorities. This took the form of a goal of establishing an energy advice service and a campaign to improve the local low-carbon public transport offering for Westwood and Sholver respectively.[36]

The Oldham Energy Futures project is a prime example of a collaborative, community-first approach to engaging with the energy transition and supporting community action on energy that moves away from the jargon of government targets and shifts the emphasis to local assets and ambitions.

Awareness and understanding of funding options and processes

Local and community energy projects have traditionally relied upon a range of funding and finance sources. Established groups have become skilled at creating a delicate chain of

[35] CLES, 2022, Oldham Energy Futures

[36] Oldham Energy Futures, 2022, Community leaders set new direction for Oldham's transition to zero carbon

resource where earlier forms of funding help de-risk a project and unlock more avenues of finance later.[37]

More experienced individuals and organisations are better placed to access capacity and other funding programmes through knowledge of bid-writing and funding processes.[38] The success of a project heavily relies upon the ability of a group to navigate a complex landscape of support mechanisms and different financial initiatives, and is often helped by expertise and support from intermediary organisations with grant applications and finding finance.[39] In a recent survey, 25% of existing community energy groups in Scotland stated a lack of capacity to even apply for the capital support being provided.[40] As a lot of grants are distributed via a competitive process, this can mean that organisations and local authorities that already have expertise around grant applications and the capacity to apply are more likely to win funding – perpetuating inequalities between better-resourced and less affluent, marginalised communities.[41]

Identifying capacity challenges and targeted awareness-raising can help to overcome some of these issues. While some funding schemes seek to build new capacity, there is a distinct lack of understanding by capacity fund administrators (typically devolved government or public bodies) on the existing capacity within communities, knowledge of key stakeholders and limited active promotion of schemes at the local level. This makes it challenging for communities with no previous knowledge or experience to access them, and limits the reach of funding programmes mostly to known organisations.

To resolve this, there is a dual need to target promotion and clarify this process for lesser-served areas, and to better link existing intermediary resource and expertise. Work done by the regional Climate Action Hubs supported by the Scottish government has made significant progress towards their intended targets around developing community capacity across a range of areas, successfully engaging communities in climate action, building resilience and developing approaches that are fundamentally tailored towards local contexts and priorities.[42]

Funding for capacity building needs to be available on a longer-term basis, recognising that this can be a long-term process. Funding from programmes such as CARES has been immensely helpful for many projects but remain hindered by their short term funding cycles and

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[37] I. Cairns, M. Hannon, T. Braunholtz-Speight, et.al, Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions, 2023, Financing grassroots innovation diffusion pathways: the case of UK community energy

[38] Regen, 2024, Barriers to community energy, call for evidence response

[39] B. Slee, 2020, Social innovation in community energy in Scotland: Institutional form and sustainability outcomes.

[40] Community Energy Scotland, 2024, A Fair Energy Deal for Scottish Communities

[41] Energy Saving Trust, 2024, Our response to barriers to community energy projects call for evidence

[42] Scottish Government, 2025, Scottish climate action hubs: independent evaluation

the general broader lack of funding for pre-project inception engagement and capacity building. One-year funding schemes are too short-term and are essentially, as one interviewee put it, "putting money into the fire" if they don't link to longer-term multi-year funding.

This makes it challenging for new organisations to set up as a group, develop a project plan and apply for funding – meaning that much of the short-term funding available (such as the Scottish government's capacity fund) is likely to go to existing groups expanding operations. Recognising that, in low-income and marginalised areas with less existing energy expertise, building energy knowledge and support for projects may take longer, there is a clear need for capacity schemes that take a more flexible, longer-term view.

Community benefit funds from large-scale developments can provide a valuable capacity-building resource. Several stakeholders identified the lack of transparency surrounding community benefit funds agreements between communities and developers makes it difficult for other communities, and particularly those that are lower-income and more marginalised, to advocate for themselves in community benefit funding negotiations. With strong, representative fund governance, the finance available for these funds can deliver local upskilling, engagement and resourcing tailored to a community's needs.

Aligning community-led energy initiatives to social and economic ambitions

While many are concerned about the climate crisis and energy bills, for many communities, energy or decarbonisation is rarely the driving priority. Where projects have been successful in capacity-building and delivery, we consistently heard that this was **a result of tying the opportunity of clean energy schemes to local social and economic needs and ambitions, with a social justice framing**.[43] This is crucial to building capacity and clean energy initiatives that reflect local needs, engage diverse groups of people and deliver broad co-benefits. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

This means that understanding community needs and aspirations should *precede* project ideas – and that efforts to promote community-led energy initiatives should be framed by their relevance to wider social and economic priorities, based on positive engagement.

Raising awareness of the opportunity of community-led clean energy initiatives and how they can address diverse social and economic issues is needed to stimulate interest. Established organisations and intermediaries noted that, despite concerted efforts, awareness of community-led clean energy initiatives remains low, particularly among lower-income and

[43] D.Nientemp, F,Goedkoop, A.Flache, et. al, 2024, A social network approach to community energy initiative participation

marginalised communities – especially the potential to use them to tackle social and economic priorities. This makes it challenging for those communities to initiate interest themselves where some interest or knowledge does not already exist. In a citizen's jury with people from low-income and marginalised backgrounds in Scotland, only 1 of 22 participants was aware of community energy as a concept.[44]

Spreading the word about community-led action on energy, and starting to build an 'appetite for change' through conversations and campaigns, is an essential part of enabling more communities to access capacity support schemes and subsequently lead their own clean energy initiatives. Without this there is a risk of a postcode lottery, where the communities that know of the opportunities available are able to reap the benefits while others remain excluded.

> *"The way [grant] programmes are structured do not give enough upfront time to build interest and appetite... It's not easy without time or considered conversations."*
>
> **– Alistair Macpherson, Plymouth Energy Community**

Linking to wider goals is not just a local issue, but a policy challenge. Community-led energy initiatives provide a range of social, economic and environmental benefits, including supporting those in fuel poverty with bills and energy-efficiency measures; improving health outcomes through partnerships with social care; building resilience and skills to lead on other anti-poverty and inequality initiatives; and climate-related behaviour change and education with often-excluded groups. As the Scottish and UK governments seek to enable more community-led energy initiatives – particularly community-owned generation, which often funds further just transition activities – this wider value must be recognised, and the dots joined at government and policy level. Community capacity needs to be seen as an enabler not just for projects, but to support broader policy ambitions.

Capacity-building programmes for just transition outcomes must be guided by just transition principles. While positive in delivering extensive social value, community-led energy initiatives are not automatically 'just' by nature.[Error! Bookmark not defined.] It can often be difficult to establish who is actually participating in community-led energy projects, and the degree to which underrepresented groups are involved. As a result, capacity schemes (as outlined previously) may unwittingly perpetuate inequalities between existing, better-resourced organisations and communities and those who have historically been excluded from the value of community-led energy programmes.

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[44] Regen, 2025. Leveraging local and community energy for a just transition in Scotland.

To ensure that capacity-building schemes are designed to avoid exacerbating inequalities and can actively target those groups excluded or at risk of exclusion, frameworks exist to help guide policy and decision making, from national to devolved to local government level. For example, the energy justice POINTs framework walks decision makers through key questions and processes to embed social justice (and wider co-benefits) in policy or project design. Leveraging such frameworks can help shape 'fairer' capacity schemes that recognise and deliver benefits against diverse social and economic challenges.[45]

[45] R. Bray, R. Ford, 2022, Glasgow Community Energy Energy Justice POINTs case study

3 Recommendations

Across this research, key features emerged which are present in many 'successful' community-led energy initiatives. Yet there are clear barriers to enabling this at scale. This section sets out recommendations for the Scottish government, local authorities and intermediaries to enable effective capacity building in a range of communities and help unlock the extensive benefits of community-led energy action.

Recommendation 1: Standardise processes to map and understand capacity at a local level

The Scottish government, local authorities, GB Energy and intermediary organisations should establish tools and methodologies for capacity mapping and identification at the local authority level, building on existing best practice. This can help relevant intermediaries and capacity funders understand which organisations operate in a given area, what their existing expertise is and what assets they already hold, the socioeconomic and demographic context of the area, and which groups or stakeholders they can engage to promote community-led initiatives and build interest.

Recommendation 2: Launch a national community energy awareness campaign, framed around meeting social and economic needs

General awareness of community-led energy initiatives is currently very low (only 13% of respondents to an Ipsos survey said they were aware of the concept).[46] However, when presented with the idea, people tend to be more supportive of community energy than privately owned renewable generation (62% would support a community-owned project in their area, compared to 40% for a private one). [29]

The sector is already leading through campaigns such as 'Up The Energy', led by Community Energy England, but more targeted outreach from national and devolved governments and Great British Energy can help this message to reach key excluded areas. This campaign could be targeted at areas without existing community-led initiatives, through schools, educational institutions, local authority networks and other public forums.

Recommendation 3: Prioritise and resource meaningful engagement with typically excluded communities within capacity funding schemes

The Scottish government should outline processes and best practice guidance for engagement and participation in building community capacity. This guidance should be relevant for individuals, communities, intermediaries, local authorities and funders – with a focus on inclusive engagement processes.

Public engagement, while a key cornerstone of a just transition, does not inherently lead to energy justice.[47] This engagement should provide a clear pathway to participation,and generate appetite to deliver projects. The Scottish government should incorporate best practice principles, and signpost training and process materials, into its existing guidance, such as the Participation Handbook.

Recommendation 4: Hire technical development officers at a local authority level

To help stimulate interest and build capacity on the ground, there is a clear need for paid staff and expertise at a local level. This developmental work can help overcome challenges of knowledge, skills and organisational capacity, and current limitations in the regional approach taken by the CARES programme. The Scottish government should provide funding via CARES for Local Energy Scotland, Community Energy Scotland, Development Trust Association and Climate Hubs to upskill and fulfil this role consistently at the local authority level, enabling staff to develop local stakeholder networks, capacity needs and pipeline project opportunities.

Recommendation 5: Establish a staged, multi-year capacity funding approach

A critical limitation of capacity-building schemes is that funding is short term in scope. Establishing staged, multi-year funding schemes tied to development milestones can help ensure that communities that require more work to build capacity have the space and flexibility to do so. This should also be available to experienced community energy, intermediary and other community-level organisations to maximise routes to entry.

Recommendation 6: Develop a programme of modular, online CPD-style training for local authority officers

An online training service is needed, setting out the basics of community-led initiatives through case study examples and modules presented by experienced community partners. This training should cover aspects such as how to engage and when, identifying sites, building community capacity and interest, community wealth building, seeking funding, technical processes and legal requirements. This could be delivered by CARES, GB Energy, or in a collaborative effort between the two.

Recommendation 7: Develop a central platform to record project information, experience and impact, helping to share best practise and track success of capacity and community programmes

Shareable knowledge can be invaluable to prospective community projects. However, different funders have different requirements, with different processes for recording project success or experience. Incentivising consistency via a platform held by Local Energy Scotland, GB Energy or similar would help standardise this process and enable more people to benefit from project learnings.

Recommendation 8: Better utilise capital available through community benefit funds to develop capacity

Community benefit funds from renewable energy projects can be a valuable resource for communities to fund meaningful, developmental initiatives. Through these funds, stakeholders identified a critical opportunity to support capacity building, such as funding community organisations to deliver engagement, awareness-raising and local upskilling to then access other funding streams for project development and delivery. Although funds should be flexible to community needs, guidance for community benefit funds should include processes, case studies and best practise for building capacity – particularly in lower-income and marginalised communities – with an obligation on developers or infrastructure providers to support this process.

Recommendation 9: Embed community capacity as a key feature in the wider policy landscape, linking energy, health, transport, climate and anti-poverty work more effectively

Energy-related schemes are often held apart from other local and community-level work, such as health and transport, yet there are clear interconnections. By further integrating capacity-building for energy initiatives with wider policy goals, such as community wealth-building and community empowerment, synergies can better be drawn and capacity supported for multi-faceted and transformative outcomes.

Table 2 (below) maps each recommendation to the most relevant key features of a community with capacity.

[46] Ipsos, 2023, Community Energy: A climate solution that's potentially right at the doorstep

[47] I. Suboticki, S. Heidenreich, M. Ryghaug, T. Moe Skølsvold, 2023, Fostering justice through engagement: A literature review of public engagement in energy transitions

Table 2. List of recommendations and relevant key features

Recommendation	Relevant key features
1. Standardise processes to map and understand capacity at a local level	Deep understanding of community networks
2. Launch a national community energy awareness campaign, framed around meeting social and economic needs	Aligning clean energy initiatives to social and economic ambitions
3. Prioritise and resource meaningful engagement within capacity funding schemes	Deep understanding of community networks
4. Hire technical development officers at a local authority level	A strong ecosystem of community organisations and intermediaries
5. Establish a staged, multi-year capacity funding programme	Awareness and understanding of funding options and processes
6. Develop a programme of modular, online CPD-style training for local authority officers	A strong ecosystem of community organisations and intermediaries
7. Develop a central platform to record project information, experience and impact, helping to share best practise and track success of capacity and community programmes	Personal or individual capacity; A strong ecosystem of community organisations and intermediaries
8. Better utilise capital available through community benefit funds to develop capacity	Awareness and understanding of funding options and processes
9. Embed community capacity as a key feature in the wider policy landscape, linking energy, health, transport, climate and anti-poverty work more effectively	Aligning community-led energy initiatives to social and economic ambitions

4 Appendix A: Support organisations and intermediaries in Scotland

A strong mutual support network of energy actors and intermediaries is an essential part of efforts to address the climate crisis and energy justice.[48] These organisations play a vital role in stimulating and fostering grassroots initiatives and help to cross traditional communication boundaries that might exist between state and individual.[49]

Scotland has a well-established base of central organisations that provide support and resources to communities looking to lead their own energy projects, with Community Energy Scotland and the Local Energy Scotland consortium at its core. The Community and Renewable Energy Scheme (CARES) run by Local Energy Scotland provides a considerable portion of the funding given to community-led action on energy each year, and the consortium provides mentoring and development officers alongside this. There is a broad network of other financial support grants, funds and mechanisms that enable community organisations from project inception onwards; a good summary of these sources of funding can be found on Community Energy Scotland's Funders and Financing page.

Community Energy Scotland play a central knowledge sharing and convening role for the sector, through conferences, events, resources and signposting. There is also a web of regional agencies and climate hubs that do invaluable work building community capacity for climate action, from the pre-project development stage through to delivery.

[48] M. Lacey-Barnacle, C.M. Bird, 2018, Intermediating energy justice? The role of intermediaries in the civic energy sector in a time of austerity

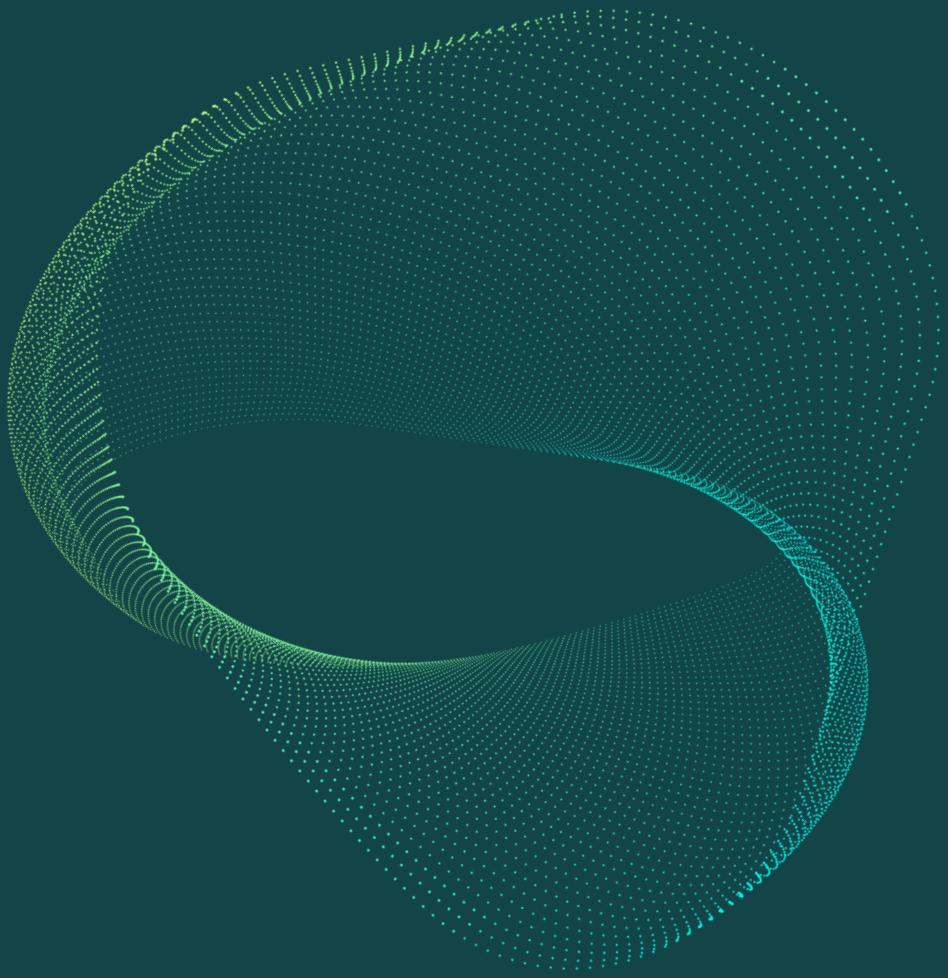
[49] E. Boyle, C. Watson, G. Mulley, B. O'Gallachoir, 2021, Regime-based transition intermediaries at the grassroots for community energy initiatives

Table 3: Key support organisations operating in the community capacity and locally owned energy space in Scotland

Organisation	Support provided	Region
Energy-specific organisations		
Community Energy Scotland	Independent, member-led organisation focused on amplifying and advocating for the community energy sector in Scotland	Scotland-wide
Local Energy Scotland	Consortium that administers and manages CARES, offering a range of financial and development advice alongside	Scotland-wide
Energy Action Scotland	Charity with the explicit aim of ending fuel poverty in Scotland; provides support and resources to members	Scotland-wide
Changeworks	Charity that works alongside local authorities, housing associations and community groups to tackle fuel poverty	Scotland-wide
Centre for Sustainable Energy	Independent organisation providing research insights, energy advice and support to community organisations and councils	UK-wide
Community Energy Pathways	Independent organisation working specifically to build local capacity for community-led action on energy through a combination of community engagement, mentoring and training	UK-wide
Energy Saving Trust	Independent organisation providing insight, advice, training and consultancy services to communities, local authorities and businesses of all sizes	UK-wide
Non-energy specific organisations – central support		
Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations	The national membership organisation for the voluntary sector; provides support and resources for voluntary organisations	Scotland-wide

CEMVO Scotland	National intermediary organisation with the aim of building capacity within the ethnic minority voluntary sector	Scotland-wide
Development Trust Association Scotland	Member-led organisation that represents and supports development trusts across Scotland	Scotland-wide
Scottish Communities Climate Action Network	Volunteer-led network supporting community-led climate action in Scotland	Scotland-wide
Foundation Scotland	Charity working to bring communities, funders and finance together; has distributed more than £200 million to communities across Scotland	Scotland-wide
Scottish Community Development Centre	The lead body for community development in Scotland	Scotland-wide
Scottish Enterprise	Scotland's national economic development agency	Scotland-wide
Scottish Community Alliance	Coalition of networks and intermediaries with a commitment to community empowerment	Scotland-wide
Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)	Councillor-led, cross-party organisation championing the work of Scotland's councils	Scotland-wide
The Poverty Alliance	National network of organisations working together to end fuel poverty	Scotland-wide
Planning Aid Scotland	Charity and social enterprise that helps people navigate the planning system	Scotland-wide
Friends of the Earth Scotland	Grassroots environmental campaigning organisation	Scotland-wide
Non-energy specific organisations – regional support		
Climate Action Hubs	Designed to provide a strategic regional approach to action on climate, the 24 hubs support local groups to develop climate action projects as well as shape local and national projects	Scotland-wide

Scottish Community Councils	More than 1,000 councils, run by local residents to advocate for and advise on a range of community causes	Scotland-wide
Regional Economic Partnerships (REP)	Eight REPs oversee collaborations between local government, private sector, enterprise and skills agencies and the third sector to deliver economic prosperity	Scotland-wide
Highlands and Islands Enterprise	Economic and development agency working with businesses, communities and social enterprises	Highlands and Islands
South of Scotland Enterprise	Economic and development agency working with businesses, communities and social enterprises	Dumfries, Galloway, the Scottish Borders



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