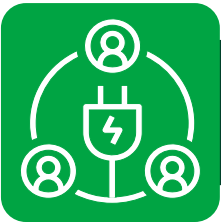


Community Energy

# Communications plan for communities

## SP Energy Networks Communication Guide



# Communication guide

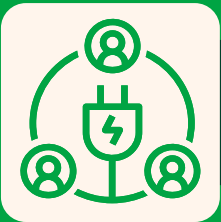
This guide has been created to support communities in their pursuit of community energy projects with effective communication and engagement.

It is designed to inform you about the Community Energy Journey, Community Energy more broadly and then give practical guidance on how to undertake a communications plan as you embark on your community energy project.

For more information, please visit:

[spenergynetworks.co.uk/pages/community\\_energy\\_journey.aspx](https://spenergynetworks.co.uk/pages/community_energy_journey.aspx)





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# 1. What is SP Energy Networks Community Energy Journey

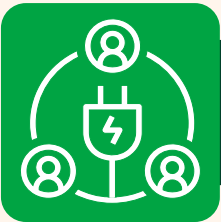
Community energy projects can bring a wide range of benefits to local areas — from generating renewable electricity and reducing carbon emissions to creating income, improving local resilience, and bringing communities together around a shared purpose. However, developing a community energy project can sometimes feel complex, particularly for groups who are at the beginning of their journey.

To help support community groups through this process, SP Energy Networks developed the Community Energy Journey — a step-by-step guide designed to help groups understand the key stages involved in developing a community energy project. The journey has been designed to support communities at different stages of development, from early engagement and idea generation through to feasibility, funding, technical support, and ultimately connecting a project to the electricity network.

The journey combines practical guidance, videos, and supporting resources to help demystify the process and make community energy more accessible. It is not intended to be a rigid pathway, as every project and community is different, but instead provides a flexible framework to help groups understand the questions they may need to consider as their project develops.

These supporting guidance documents have been developed to sit alongside the Community Energy Journey and provide additional detail, examples, and practical advice for each stage of the process.





## 2. What is Community Energy?

Community energy refers to locally driven energy initiatives such as renewable electricity generation, renewable heat solutions and energy efficiency programmes that are owned, controlled, or delivered by communities for the benefit of local people.

These projects play an important role in supporting the UK’s transition to net zero by enabling low-carbon, decentralised energy solutions while also addressing issues such as fuel poverty and energy security. By retaining financial benefits within the community and encouraging local participation, community energy schemes help build public engagement, increase acceptance of energy infrastructure, and deliver wider social, environmental, and economic value.

### 3. What is Community Engagement and why is it so important?

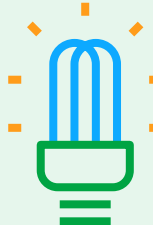
Community engagement refers to the process of involving local residents, organisations and stakeholders in decision making, planning and implementation activities that affect their community. It’s about creating meaningful partnerships between project leaders and the community to ensure that the voices, needs, and concerns of the people are heard and addressed.



The importance of community engagement in community energy projects can be defined in the following ways:



**Tailored Solutions:** Community energy projects aim to develop sustainable, localised energy solutions, such as renewable electricity initiatives. Engaging the community ensures that these solutions are tailored to the specific needs and preferences of the people who will use them.



**Leveraging Local Knowledge:** Community members often possess valuable insights into local conditions, such as environmental factors, social dynamics, and historical context, which can greatly enhance the design and effectiveness of the project.



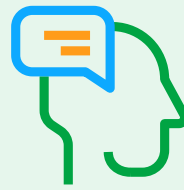
**Addressing Equity and Inclusivity:** Community engagement helps ensure that all voices are heard, particularly those from marginalised or vulnerable groups. This is essential for ensuring that the benefits of the project are distributed fairly and that no one is disproportionately burdened.



**Building Trust and Support:** When community members are actively involved in the project, they are more likely to trust the process and support the outcomes. This is crucial for projects that require changes in infrastructure or behaviour.



**Enhancing Adoption and Compliance:** Projects that align with community values and involve residents in the planning stages tend to see higher adoption rates. For instance, if a community feels ownership over a new renewable electricity system, they are more likely to use and maintain it effectively.



**Conflict Resolution:** Early and continuous engagement can help identify potential sources of conflict and address them proactively, reducing the likelihood of opposition or legal challenges that could delay or derail the project.



## 4. Principles of good community engagement for energy projects

High quality community engagement is widely recognised as being crucial to the long-term success of community energy projects. It is vital in securing the buy-in of sufficient stakeholders to make projects viable, and in order to achieve this, stakeholders need to feel they are part of the project and that they accurately understand the advantages (and disadvantages) of any proposed project.

Given the varied levels of awareness and understanding of renewable technologies, effectively engaging with households to overcome this is essential. The gap between general awareness and deeper understanding highlights the importance of targeted communication and engagement to enable informed decision making and public acceptance of all renewable solutions.

Advised principles to follow in successful community engagement include:

### Use of non-technical language

It is often the case that concerns over reliability, efficiency, running cost and carbon savings materialise as communities engage with such projects. These concerns are exacerbated when complex or opaque technical language is used.

### Addressing relevant local issues/concerns

In order to bring the wider community along, it is important to tailor community engagement messaging to address any local concerns. For example, if fuel poverty is the main concern but communications are all about net zero, it is unlikely to generate buy-in.

### Honest presentation of the project's pros and cons

Not being completely upfront about the drawbacks, risks and challenges can be a major stumbling block as these become apparent to participants as a project progresses. Ensuring communities are aware of these at the feasibility stage reduces unexpected surprises that could derail a project later down the track. You should seek to accurately present the positive aspects of projects (ensuring they are not overinflated), and ensure clear communication of any downsides, and encourage project leaders to take the same approach.

### Reaching the whole community

Identify harder to reach segments of the community and maximise opportunities for community energy to be available to everyone.

### Open and ongoing engagement

If this hasn't already been established, project leaders need to ensure that it is easy for the wider community to get involved and input ideas and avoid a 'Decide-Announce-Defend' approach. Building these relationships and trust from the outset, then maintaining them through ongoing engagement keeping people up to date with progress, is likely to result in higher levels of buy-in/sign-up to the proposed energy project.

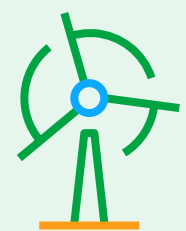
### Education and myth busting

Levels of public understanding of the role of renewable energy in the climate crisis can be varied. Providing unbiased, accurate information on low carbon technologies and why community energy is a good option is essential.

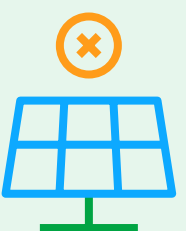


# 5. Engaging project stakeholders: Creating a Communications Plan

The starting point for your communications plan will be to take local circumstances and experience into account. For example, your community could have:

- 

Existing experience with renewable generation, which could be through development of a community asset, such as Solar PV or a wind turbine.
- 

Received community-benefit money and have an existing local trust responsible for the management of these funds.
- 

Previously tried to develop renewable energy generation but failed to attract sufficient investment or found the development process too difficult.
- 

No experience of renewable generation, or only have experience with individuals who have installed small-scale renewables on their property.

Then, as an individual or local organisation thinking about creating a Local Energy Plan, a wider group of community representatives will need to get involved to get behind the communication plan. This will help with momentum, local knowledge, and ideas about how to seek wider community views. Some possible approaches include:

- 

**Community council:** The community council can lead the LEP development and include an ongoing agenda item in its regular meetings. This could include creation of a sub-committee if it would be most effective.
- 

**Community trust/development trust:** If an existing local community trust is already in place, it may be able to lead the LEP development.
- 

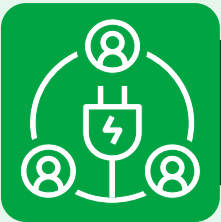
**Local steering group:** A group created to direct and steer the development of a LEP. It would include a mix of individuals representing their own views or those of their business or local organisation.



## Creating a Community Engagement Communications Plan

There are three main stages to follow when creating your Communications Plan. In the following sections, we have broken these stages down into practical steps with associated resources.

1. Understand Your Stakeholders
2. Create Key Messages
3. Engage Your Stakeholders



Creating a Community Engagement Communications Plan:

1. Understand Your Stakeholders

Identify Stakeholders

The first step is to identify your internal and external stakeholders. This could be anyone who has an interest in or could be affected by your project. They may play a direct or indirect role. Think as broadly as possible at this stage, and you may want to create a stakeholder map to show how they interact with one another.

When building your stakeholder list, you should consider two important elements:

Understand barriers and motivators

One of the most important things to understand from every stakeholder, internal or external, is their motivators for and barriers to engagement with the project. This information can be used to inform how you engage with them and the types of messages that you use.

Identify advocates and non-supporters

Understanding an influential stakeholder’s attitude to the project is crucial (e.g. Supporter, Opponent, Observer or Unknown). You will also want to engage with non-supporters on a one-to-one basis and address their concerns before engaging with them in a group setting.

Prioritisation

It’s now important to prioritise stakeholders to ensure that your resources are targeted as effectively as possible. It is also part

of the process of managing your stakeholders, as the level and type of engagement you have with them will help set their own expectations of their role within the project.

You should use your identification list and stakeholder map as the starting point for the prioritisation exercise. Stakeholders are normally grouped by:

Build Awareness

Whilst these stakeholders are not the most crucial group, they should not be forgotten. You may find unexpected supporters in that group and their status may change as the project progresses.

Key Players

This group has both significant interest and influence, making their support critical to the project’s success.

Keep Informed

These stakeholders may have significant interest in the outcome of the project but do not have a direct role. Their influence could change over time, and you may want to move some of those individuals to a more involved position to benefit from their support.

Keep Satisfied

These stakeholders may have little interest in the project but may nevertheless carry influence. Keep them engaged and seek their views.



Resource

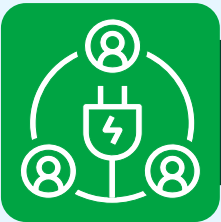


Use the 2x2 diagram to help you to plot out your stakeholders and prioritise them. This is available as a resource in the supplement to this document, in section 1.2.

Stakeholders to consider



- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Local residents</li><li>• Local government and municipal authorities</li><li>• Environmental groups</li><li>• Business community</li><li>• Utilities and energy providers</li><li>• Educational institutions</li><li>• Non-profit and community organisations</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Health and social services providers</li><li>• Financial institutions</li><li>• Faith-based organisations</li><li>• Media and communications outlets</li><li>• Cultural groups</li><li>• Legal and regulatory bodies</li><li>• Technology providers</li><li>• Transportation and logistics providers</li></ul> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|



Creating a Community Engagement Communications Plan:

2. Create Key Messages

Create Stakeholder Messages

The best people to tell you what message will work best is the stakeholder themselves. During your stakeholder assessment in the previous stage, you will have heard their concerns and what motivates them, and you have categorised and prioritised them, so you can now tailor your messages accordingly.

Using a marketing technique such as the ‘7 Ps’ you can now tailor relevant messages to address concerns and motivations. Using the stakeholder groups, you can list out relevant stakeholders under each and then create a message for each. You may not need a message for every ‘P’, but going through them is a good idea for completeness.

Here are the 7 Ps and examples of what messages to formulate against each:

**Product:** What community energy technologies are being proposed? What are the benefits? Is education required?

**Price:** What costs does the community energy project involve? How does this impact individuals? Is fuel poverty being addressed?

**Place:** Where is the proposed community energy project taking place, and who is impacted?

**Promotion:** How can the community get more information about the project?

**People:** Who is involved in the project, who can the community speak to? Who is supporting the project?

**Process:** What is the project timeline? What are the steps that will need to happen and when?

**Physical Evidence:** Can previous, successful projects and stories be demonstrated, for example through case studies?

Create Elevator Pitch Messaging

Now you have worked through key messaging for each stakeholder and stakeholder group, you will need to have some overarching ‘elevator pitch’ messaging in order to promote the community energy project. This is important when you need to succinctly communicate the project, drawing on some of the key points to gain the attention and support of your stakeholders.

One technique for this is ‘AIDA’: Attention, Interest, Desire, Action.

**Attention:** Capturing the stakeholder’s awareness of your project. Eye catching visuals, strong headlines, unique selling propositions (USPs); something that grabs attention immediately.

**Interest:** Engaging stakeholder interest by providing relevant and appealing information about the project, such as benefits and features that highlight how the project meets certain needs.

**Desire:** Building a strong desire for the project by making stakeholders feel they need or want it. Create a strong desire by demonstrating its value, possibly addressing pain points

**Action:** Clear calls to action (CTAs) that encourage stakeholders to take the next step to engage meaningfully with the project - such as signing up or committing to next steps.

You can use the AIDA approach in relation to each stakeholder group or in response to particular issues, concerns and areas stakeholders feel particularly positive about.



Resource

There is an example of a way you can map your key messages against the stakeholders in relation to their status, as plotted from the previous section, in section 2.1 of the supplement document.



Creating a Community Engagement Communications Plan:

3. Engage Your Stakeholders

Communication Strategy

A strategy clearly outlines what your communications will achieve for the project. Create an overarching goal, then generate 3 or more core objectives that are critical to achieving that goal.

For example, your goal could be to secure funding of £X based on community support in the form of X number of signatories. The objectives could be to:

- 1. Get 150 community members to attend a key promotional event
- 2. Address and onboard a minimum of 75% of identified non-supporters
- 3. Obtain 200 community signatures in support of the project

Resource



Once you know what tactics you are going to implement, use an Action Plan so you know when you will deliver certain tactics as well as milestones. Please see 3.1 of the supplement document for a template of this resource.

Tactics and Action

Communication tactics derive from your objectives i.e. what are you actually going to deliver to achieve each objective? It is useful to split your tactics into two categories: Online and Offline. Community engagement options include items such as:

Online

- Dedicated project website and/or Facebook page – or use existing, popular community websites
- Social media platforms
- Digital Newsletters/email updates
- Online PR
- Articles and Blogs
- Case studies
- Video and imagery

Offline

- Leaflets or flyers (door to door delivery, in local shops etc)
- Posters
- Articles and updates in local print magazines/ newsletters
- Stalls at local events or venues
- Public meetings
- Door to door
- Talk to existing groups (e.g. tenant forums, WI, business clubs)
- Specific project event(s)





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