
The event was coordinated by a broad panel; offering a wide range of perspectives on community energy. The panel shared in common the sense that they were part of a movement under attack from the current Government. Decisions made to remove financial support for large-scale solar and onshore wind; removal of pre-accreditation of projects and threat to remove FITs (feed in tariffs) all putting a squeeze on the industry. With the 23rd October deadline for consultation on the future of FITs fast approaching; the industry is in a frenzy to coordinate its defence and rush through last minute accreditations, preparing to move into a post-subsidy era. The changes are anticipated to make a huge impact on the viability of many schemes, with solar being particularly damaged.

See more: make link to rest of document here

Dr Christian Jardine from Joju solar calculated that Ground Mount Solar projects are unlikely to work without subsidies. Despite this, the mood on the panel was ever optimistic, with Joju pointing out that the technology of solar is ‘unstoppable’, with or without feed in tariffs.

Questions posed at the event led to a good structure for summarising the key questions of the debate.

• Are our institutions fit for purpose?
• How will market players need to change?
• Are customers ready for an energy revolution?

There were unanimous concerns about the barriers to entry in terms of planning and permitting, and particularly about the rights of community energy to directly supply energy to the communities they are owned by. Unlocking financing was another key aim to enable a brighter future for community energy projects, with the current political approach and removal of subsidies creating uncertainty that is unhelpful for those projects trying to attract investment.

It seems the answers to the first two questions listed above are a “no”, but the outlook was not painted as bleak. Even the pulling of financial support by the Government was presented as potentially offering a silver lining. For example, Energy Minister Amber Rudd was quoted as suggesting... ‘an end to onshore wind subsidies could lead to more community onshore wind.’

In answer the third question, it seems politicians’ approach to the issue does not reflect public opinion. A survey conducted by Co-operative Energy this August demonstrated huge public support for community energy schemes, even amongst conservative voters.
When asked if they would support a wind turbine within 2 miles of their home, 22% surveyed said they were against, and 49% were in favour. When asked the same question but with the turbine and energy generated being owned by the local community opposition to the idea fell and support rose with only 7% being against and 68% in favour. These figures were mirrored for Tory voters more specifically with 11% against and 62% in favour of a community owned turbine within 2 miles of their homes.

In addition to conducting surveys on public opinion on community energy; Co-operative Energy were awarded “Renewable Energy Award 2015’ and are offering innovative and novel levels of consumer influence through their ‘User Chooser’ facility; allowing customers to choose how their energy supply is generated. In addition to political lobbying alongside groups such as Community Energy England (CEE), Co-operative Energy also gets a portion of ‘Active Supply’ from existing community projects.

However, there is some confusion over the aims of community energy and it’s overlap with renewables. What is community energy all about? Is it about a lower carbon future, with more sustainable and renewable energy production? Is it about tackling concerns about security of our energy supply? Is it about empowering communities to gain shared ownership in their energy suppliers? Is it about tackling fuel poverty and making energy more affordable for customers?

Or is it about none, some or all of the above? Also, what is a community...does it have to be geographically “tight”, or will community energy projects of the future have a more flexible approach to what a community is? A debate for another time maybe; but the idea of a more flexible approach to the word community was suggested, with the concept of work-place communities where employees are the members was put forward.

In summary, the movement does not seem to be short on passionate and innovative individuals; as represented on this event’s panel. The panel outlined the need for political support, the removal of planning and permitting barriers and improved access to green investors and financing. All agreed that a successful future for community energy requires clearer aims and a more purposeful sense of direction. There is a need for a clear definition of community energy and a move towards consensus on the objectives it is trying to achieve.

For more information see:

Community Energy Coalition (CEC) and Community Energy England (CEE) provide more information and offer support for community energy projects, see web links below...

http://www.ukcec.org

http://communityenergyengland.org