

Welsh Assembly Cross Party Group on Co-operatives and Mutuals

19th MARCH 2015

12.15 – 13.30

The Media Briefing Room

Community Owned Green Energy Schemes

Assembly Members Present

Mick Antoniw (Chair)

Alun Ffred Jones

Secretariat

Alex Bird (Chair, Co-operatives and Mutuals Wales)

Speakers

Jeremy Thorp (Sharenergy) and Neil Lewis (Robert Owen Community Banking Fund - ROCBF)

Guests

David Parker (Wales Co-operative Centre), Ceri-Anne Fidler (Wales Co-operative Centre)

George Ruelibusch (Welsh Assembly) Karen Wilkie (Co-operative Party DGS) and three others

Mick Antoniw AM (Chair) opened the meeting at 12.30, welcomed the guests and introduced the speakers.

Jeremy Thorp spoke about his role working for Sharenergy, which is a co-op that covers the UK from its base in Shrewsbury, providing support to Community Energy Share Issue projects.

Most community owned energy schemes choose to raise money through a share issue to the public because this gives a lower interest rate (ticket) to the organisation whilst giving a better return to the investor than working with a bank or similar source of loan finance.

What are the barriers to such Community Energy Schemes developing? They are generally of a smaller scale to commercially owned developments, which increases the proportion of time/effort/money spent on overheads. Also, the early, at risk stages are more difficult to get through, particularly so for hydro schemes where considerable effort and money is required just to get all the consents in place. Some of the Assembly Supported Bodies (ASBs) are unhelpful, and there is no effective recourse to an arbiter or ombudsperson.

There is a great opportunity for Local Authorities, the Assembly and other public bodies to partner up with the community, particularly as they have large estates which are suitable for community generation projects.

Neil Lewis spoke about the development of a number of schemes supported by the ROCBF's Community Energy Fund. The Fund of over £1million acts as an underwriter to schemes, where the aim is usually to pay back any loans from share issues.

Some of these schemes have been very successful. Anafon Hydro, a 270kW scheme based in a village of 250 people, raised over £450,000 from a share issue with their support. Also Llangatock Green Valleys is another highly successful scheme.

However, there can be obstacles, particularly with hydro schemes. Carmarthenshire Energy have had long delays waiting for an abstraction licence, and these delays increase costs.

The Robert Owen Renewables scheme at Penarth Weir, north of Newtown has had to give up, as Cadw will not allow any changes to the existing fish pass on the weir, which is a Grade II listed monument, and the old fish pass is the proposed site of the Archimedes Screw generator. The irony of this is that the fish pass doesn't work, a new one is proposed, and the spawning fish have always had to jump the weir itself.

Also Gower Power have had to go to appeal over objections to their proposed ground mounted solar PV scheme, some of which have come from people claiming a visual impact even though they cannot themselves see the scheme.

Another scheme at Deep Navigation, aiming to use the water spilling out of the old mine workings has been delayed by RCT taking 3 years to negotiate a lease on the land.

At Evanstown, the requirement of Natural Resources Wales to carry out a fish survey, even though the water is bright orange with pollution, has again caused delay.

Neil summarised the barriers as:-

- Planning system takes too long
- Natural Resources Wales take too long to decide

Neil felt this was presumably because they are afraid of making a mistake, but not making a decision is in effect a decision to delay.

Questions and comments from the floor:-

Alex Bird suggested the Planning and Consent systems be subject to a “presumption to permit” so that if authorities didn’t come up with reasoned objections in a set time, say 6 months, permission would be granted automatically. The Chair pointed out this already applies to Betting Shop applications.

Jeremy Thorp pointed out the great opportunities to develop solar PV on social housing roofs, whereby the community get the Feed in Tariff (FiT) and the tenant gets free daytime electricity. He pointed out such a scheme Sharenergy are working on in Cannock Chase.

Mick Antoniw AM felt that this discussion had been very useful, and he would be considering the issues raised when he attends the Environment Committee’s study visit on green energy to Germany later this month

There being no further questions, **Mick Antoniw AM** closed the meeting at 13.15 and thanked everyone for attending.