UK Power Networks
Digital Strategy Consultation 2020

Joint response by Community Energy England, Community Energy London & Community Energy South – January 2020

1. What does digital mean to you?

The digital transformation of the energy network undoubtedly offers enormous opportunities for community energy organisations, but as well as a gateway to new business models digital means a steep learning curve. We know that many of our members are keen to engage proactively with new opportunities created by digitalisation of distribution networks but also that most of our community members are run primarily by volunteers without a background in the energy industry. To us, digital goes hand in hand with democratisation, since from a community perspective the ownership and operation of innovative generation and demand-management services at the household level is most likely to maximise participation and ensure that benefits are distributed as fairly and widely as possible, in addition to benefits obtained by the DSOs. However, attention must also be given to individuals who may struggle to engage digitally and so alternatives or support must be provided for householders.

2. Which digital services and outcomes are most important to you and why?

From the perspective of community energy organisations, access to data is the most important outcome. Data will be key to evaluating the potential for integrating flexibility services into new community energy business models such as domestic battery storage and community EV charging points, thereby engaging with the energy networks' digital transformation. Looking to the future, real time sharing of energy demand and supply data could allow the integration of community energy groups as aggregators of LV demand and generation flexibility services at the household level, building the liquidity required by the DSOs and facilitating exploitation of this level of the energy system while keeping the financial benefits and control in the hands of consumers themselves. A digital landscape that does not automatically favour corporate and/or large-scale/national entities but instead levels the playing field to allow community energy organisations and other local actors to participate in the transformed digital energy system despite their extensive diversity is an outcome we are keen to see achieved by all DSOs.

3. What are the common blockers you have observed in digital Delivery?

Community energy organisations often find it difficult to identify the digital services and data provision available through DNOs or may not have the resources to implement digital systems.

4. Which data types would you find most useful in the future and why?

Open source substation data will help community energy groups understand local energy use patterns. This could also be used to educate communities about their energy use and encourage homeowners to participate in adapting their energy demand and using their domestic PV and battery storage as part of aggregated community-owned flexibility provision.

5. Where could additional value be created for customers and stakeholders if we were working together more closely?

While some of our members are actively involved in investigating and trialling new forms of digital engagements with DNOs, it shouldn't be assumed that all are immediately capable of engaging in this way. We are fully supportive of UK Power Networks' drive to digitalise, but urge you to remember that exploiting the value that community energy groups can bring to LV flexibility and other areas will require routes to access open data and other digital capabilities that are user-friendly and accessible to a wide variety of people. With their deep connections to the local energy generation and consumption landscape, community energy groups are poised to drive innovation in peer to peer trading, smart local energy markets and low voltage networks as virtual microgrids, which will be based on open and real-time provision of data by DSOs. Working with community energy stakeholders will help UK Power Networks give these groups the best opportunity to develop these new services and generate benefits for both the network and local areas. We note that you have responded actively to feedback from community energy organisations in your flexibility auction process, for example, and encourage more of this openness and positive engagement.

6. What methods have you found most, and least, successful in delivering digital transformation projects?

This is very much a work in progress that the sector is adapting to. Examples include remote meter reading for community solar and wind sites and introduction of smart metering. Groups are starting to investigate digital technology for electrified heat network projects and adapting billing and trading of energy possibilities. There is also an increasing involvement in community activities related to electric vehicles and charging points.

7. How would you like to be engaged with as we iterate and develop our strategy?

This is a joint response by Community Energy England, Community Energy London and Community Energy South. We are keen to feed into your planning directly as well helping to facilitate open communication between existing community energy groups and UK Power Networks. We will be pleased to continue our productive working relationship with UK Power Networks by contributing to your subsequent consultations and working groups, as well as the ENA’s Data Working Group. Proactive engagement to avoid short timescales for responses and communications tailored to community groups that we can help to promote would also be helpful.