Evaluation report: Next Generation peer mentoring scheme

Final report on peer mentoring for Community Energy Businesses

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About Power to Change

Power to Change is the independent trust that strengthens communities through community business. We use our experience to bring partners together to fund, grow and back community business to make places thrive. We are curious and rigorous; we do, test and learn. And we are here to support community business, whatever the challenge.

We know community business works to create thriving places when local people take ownership of spaces that matter and deliver services that communities need. Our 2021-26 strategy sets out how, using strategic funding, trusted partnerships, rigorous research, policy insight, and a strong network of remarkable community businesses we will back the sector, creating the ideas, evidence, and exemplars that make the case for others to back them too. Ultimately, we will amplify the efforts of community businesses and put them at the heart of a fair economy.

About the authors

CAG Consultants is an employee-owned co-operative with more than 30 years' experience of high-quality research and evaluation on economic, social and environmental issues, with particular expertise on evaluation and sustainable energy. www.cagconsultants.co.uk

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Introduction

This report was prepared by CAG Consultants on behalf of Power to Change as part of the evaluation of the Next Generation programme. It provides an evaluation of the peer mentoring scheme that was implemented as part of the Next Generation programme, with a view to informing future peer mentoring initiatives in the community energy sector. The peer mentoring element of the Next Generation programme ran from July 2021 to January 2022, delivered by the Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) and Co-operatives UK on behalf of Power to Change. The scheme involved 9 community energy mentors who provided support and guidance to 24 mentee organisations.

This evaluation report is based on evidence gathered through online interviews undertaken by CAG Consultants with mentors, mentees and delivery partners (i.e. CSE, Co-operatives UK and Power to Change). The evaluation team also reviewed evidence gathered by Co-operatives UK during the mentor/mentee application process as well as limited survey evidence from mentors and mentees. CAG Consultants selected mentees for interview so that there was at least some feedback on mentees for each mentor, and so that a range of type of groups were included.

Making a difference to mentees

Twenty four groups were offered mentoring. Of these, 14 were community energy groups while 4 had wider sustainability aims, 5 had both regeneration and sustainability aims and one was a community transport group. Most of the groups were already well-established but 6 were new or emerging groups. Nearly half of the groups (11) were new to community energy.

Mentees were generally complimentary about their mentors and had some form of ongoing contact with them. In some cases, mentoring sparked relationships that have continued beyond the scheme. Specific benefits from the mentoring process varied:

- **8 groups made significant progress** with potential projects as a result of the mentoring support.

- **6 groups made some progress** with potential projects but felt that the peer mentoring did not fully meet their needs or expectations.

- **9 groups received little benefit** from the mentoring process, for reasons that included external factors as well as factors relating to the mentoring process itself.

- The outcome for one group was unknown.

Examples of significant impacts of the peer mentoring process included:

- **Helping an existing CE group to plan a new commercial service** for low carbon heat and energy efficiency, broadening their activities from a previous focus on roof-top solar installations supported by the Feed In Tariff.

- **Helping an existing CE group to consult their local community** on a potential wind or solar generation scheme, and supporting other aspects of planning for such a scheme.

- **Helping an existing sustainability group to set up a new energy champion scheme.** In this case, the mentoring scheme supplemented support that the group was receiving from another source and made a real difference in helping the group to turn their plans into reality.

- **Helping a sustainability/regeneration group to identify a realistic first sustainable energy project** that was consistent with the funding and resources available.

- **Supporting a new sustainability group on financial modelling and project planning** for a potential solar project, including the identification of the need to set up a new Community Benefit Society.

- **Helping an emerging CE group to develop as an organisation** by sharing template documents with them and by acting as a sounding board on their three potential projects.

The peer mentoring process generated more impact where:

- **The mentee had specific projects, studies or development needs** that they wanted help with; had project ideas that were potentially viable; and was able to focus the mentor's input on specific 'problems', issues or questions.

- **The mentor had the skills/experience that the mentee was looking for;** took time to understand the mentee's real needs/expectations; provided at least some one to one support to the mentee; made time for meetings within a reasonable timeframe and was diligent in providing follow-up support between meetings.

Key findings on the design and delivery of the peer mentoring scheme

We have considered the design and delivery of this scheme in some detail, to inform the design of future peer mentoring schemes in the community energy sector. The delivery partners commented that, because of budget constraints, this was a relatively 'light touch' scheme compared to other peer mentoring schemes in the community energy sector. Mentors agreed with this, in terms of the level of peer mentoring provided, the relatively short duration of the scheme and the level of handholding provided to participants in the scheme. It

might have been helpful for Power to Change and the delivery partners to consider a more intensive scheme, if budget and timing had allowed this.

The intention was to offer mentoring to small groups of organisations, offering 4 days across the group over a 6-month period. In practice, many mentors offered a mixture of joint and one to one support. Feedback from mentors and mentees indicates that use of mentee groups was only successful in a few cases where mentees were well-matched and at a similar stage (e.g. where all mentees were relatively experienced). Most mentees wanted one to one mentoring on their own issues.

The delivery partners reported that there was no problem selecting good mentors for the scheme, possibly because of the culture of mutual support within the sector and the history of peer mentoring within the community energy sector. They reported that recruitment of mentees was initially challenging, possibly because of an early emphasis on mentees being interested in 'innovation' (e.g. use of new technologies and/or new business models for community energy that were viable in the absence of Feed In Tariff subsidies). While broadening the criteria for mentees helped to increase numbers, the delivery partners reported that extending the scheme meant that less experienced groups were included. This made delivery of the 'mentee group' approach more problematic.

Some mentors and mentees reported that it would have been useful to clarify mentee needs at an early stage (e.g. through an initial call before they were allocated to a mentor). This would have helped to improve matching between mentors and mentees but would have required an increased budget for project management by Coops UK.

Initial briefing for mentors was good but some mentors and mentees reported that it might have been helpful for the scheme organisers to have provided more handholding for mentors and mentees during the mentoring programme (e.g. initial call with mentees; networking for mentors; more regular check-ins with mentees by the scheme organiser). Again, this would have required an increased budget for project management.

The mentoring was delivered online because of the Covid pandemic, with the exception of one site visit by a mentor to a mentee project local to them. While it was logistically easier to organise a virtual mentoring scheme, some mentees would have preferred a face to face mentoring process.

The mentoring process worked best where the mentor and mentee(s) were both committed to the process, where the mentor and mentee(s) were well matched, where the mentee was able to focus discussions on a specific 'problem' that they wanted to resolve, and where the mentor was able to organise one to one sessions as well as joint sessions.

The online platform Loomio, which is available to Community Energy England members, was not used to its full potential because of difficulties with platform access and low levels of activity on the platform. It is possible that these could have been overcome if the scheme organisers' role had included more proactive stimulation of cohort discussions on Loomio. Again, this would have had budget implications.

If funding had allowed, the mentoring scheme would have generated more benefits if it had been less 'light touch' and had extended over a longer period. More clarity was needed as to whether peer mentoring was the most appropriate type of support for the target audience, particularly given the broadening of mentee recruitment. For some types of mentees, elements of coaching or advice might have been appropriate.

Learning and recommendations for future peer mentoring processes

There was considerable support for future peer mentoring schemes in the community energy sector from both mentors and mentees. One mentor commented that mentoring fitted the 'open' ethos of the CE sector, where groups tended to cooperate rather than compete, possibly because they are rarely competing with other groups in their geographical area.

Community Energy groups were reported to have a desire to share which lends itself to this kind of programme. Many of the mentors described themselves as habitually providing some free advice to other community energy groups but payment for mentors was seen as important, enabling them to dedicate more time and resources to providing support to other groups.

The isolation imposed by Covid was also cited as increasing the need for scheme of this nature. Key recommendations for the design of future peer mentoring schemes in the community energy sector were:

- Consider the inclusion of advice for some types of mentees.

- Offer one to one rather than group mentoring, with separate activities to achieve peer networking goals.

- Consider offering more mentoring days to each group, over a longer timeframe (e.g. 6 days over a 1 year period, as per other schemes).

- Allow sufficient resources so that the scheme organisers can hold calls with potential mentees to screen and understand their needs in more depth.

- Target peer mentoring at specific types of mentees with similar and well-defined needs.

- Allow sufficient resources so that the scheme organisers can offer more handholding to mentors and mentees during delivery.

1. Introduction and background to the peer mentoring scheme

This report was prepared by CAG Consultants on behalf of Power to Change as part of CAG's evaluation of the Next Generation programme. It provides an evaluation of the peer mentoring scheme that was implemented as part of the Next Generation programme, with a view to informing future peer mentoring initiatives in the community energy. The peer mentoring element of the Next Generation programme ran from July 2021 to January 2022, delivered by the Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) and Co-operatives UK on behalf of Power to Change. The scheme involved 9 community energy mentors who provided support and guidance to 24 mentee organisations.

About the Next Generation programme

The Next Generation programme ran from 2019 to 2023. It aimed to support the community energy sector in two main ways:

- Part A: by bringing more solar farms into community ownership whilst maximising the financial, environmental and social impact for their local communities.

- Part B: by supporting the development of innovative business models for the community energy that are not dependent on Feed in Tariff subsidies.

The peer mentoring activity formed part of Part C, the third element of the programme, which aimed to share learning from Parts A and B with a wider audience, both within and beyond the community energy sector.

Context for peer mentoring in the community energy sector

The peer mentoring scheme built on Co-operatives UK's experience in delivering peer mentoring to start-up and existing cooperative businesses via the HIVE programme. It also built on Cooperative UK and the Community Shares Unit's experience in delivering a peer mentoring programme to the community energy sector in 2015-16, funded by the Esmée Fairburn Trust.[1] This, in turn, was informed by the experiences of the 'Community Energy Peer Mentoring Fund' which was launched by the Cabinet Office and (then) Department of Energy and Climate Change in November 2013.

Some forms of support are available to community energy groups on a regional basis (e.g. via Distribution Network Operators and Net Zero Hubs), primarily in the form of support for groups that are applying for funding (e.g. the Rural Energy Community Fund) rather than peer mentoring per se. However, mentoring support is available to new community groups in Hampshire, Essex, Surrey and the South Downs via the 'Pathways' programme run by Community Energy South and there may be other such regional examples. This evaluation

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[1] See the impact report for the 2015 mentoring report here:
https://www.uk.coop/sites/default/files/2020-12/energy_mentoring_impact_report_online.pdf

report has been prepared with the aim of informing future mentoring or other support work for new and existing community groups in the community energy and climate action sectors.

Evaluation evidence

This evaluation report is based on evidence gathered through online interviews undertaken by CAG Consultants with mentors (5 out of 9), mentees (15 out of 24) and delivery partners (i.e. CSE, Co-operatives UK and Power to Change). The evaluation team also reviewed evidence gathered by Co-operatives UK during the mentor/mentee application process as well as survey evidence from mentors and mentees. The survey evidence from mentees was very limited as only 7 out of 24 mentees responded to a feedback survey run by Co-operatives UK, but more evidence was available from the mentor survey run by Co-operatives UK (7 out of 9 mentors, covering perspectives on the learning generated by 17 mentee groups).

CAG Consultants selected mentees for interview so that there was at least some feedback on mentees for each mentor, and so that a range of type of groups were included. Mentors were selected for interview to provide a range of experiences, from highly engaged to less engaged mentors, including some engaged with other aspects of the Next Generation programme and others outside the programme.

Limitations

The evaluation has been dependent on impacts as perceived and reported by scheme participants, rather than directly observed impacts. The research was undertaken shortly after delivery of mentoring so fuller impacts may become evident over time.

Some evidence was provided on all of the mentors and all but one of the mentees, either directly (by the individual themselves) or indirectly (e.g. by the mentor or mentee that was assigned to them). Where possible, evidence was triangulated between difference sources (e.g. survey responses; interviews with mentors, mentees and delivery staff; and mentor/mentee application data).

In general, interviews were undertaken online or by phone, lasting between 15-30 minutes for mentees and 30-45 minutes for mentors and deliver partners. A few mentees were only willing to participate in interviews lasting 15 minutes.

The mentors and mentees are listed in Appendix B but evidence is presented in anonymous form. Anonymity was promised to respondents, where feasible, to encourage them to be frank in providing their views. This means that findings cannot be presented in case study form.

2. Impacts of the peer mentoring scheme

This chapter presents evidence about the difference that the scheme made to mentees.

Twenty four groups were offered mentoring. Of these, 14 were community energy groups while 4 had wider sustainability aims, 5 had both regeneration and sustainability aims and one was a community transport group. Most of the groups were already well-established but 6 were new or emerging groups. Nearly half of the groups (11) were new to community energy.

Overall satisfaction

Positive feedback was received from the mentees who responded to the Co-operatives UK feedback survey. Although there were only 7 replies, and responses may be slightly biased towards those who were more positive about their experiences, the survey replies showed a good level of satisfaction:

- 6 out of 7 mentee respondents said the mentoring support had helped them to progress their plans.

- The average rating for mentor was 4.14 out of 5 (1 = poor; 5 = excellent).

This is backed up by positive comments about the mentors from many of the mentee interviews.

> *[Mentor] is very good at listening, when we weren't sure about something we would get follow-up emails. [..] she was thinking about what would be best for us in our situation, which people [in our group] found very encouraging (Mentee interview)*

> *Overall, very happy, I think [mentor] is a really excellent mentor. He was good at mentoring but also brought a huge amount of relevant experience. (Mentee interview)*

> *Just want to extend thanks to [mentor] for his generosity in giving his time and experience. He did it in a very personable way. (Mentee interview)*

The mentee and mentor interviews revealed that many of the mentees had some form of ongoing contact with their mentors, beyond the end of the mentoring scheme. In most cases, this meant that they felt able to email the mentors with occasional questions but in some cases the mentoring sparked an ongoing relationship. For example, in one case the mentor/mentee group continued to meet on a six-weekly basis, as described further below. The only mentees who did not maintain some contact with their mentors were those who reported themselves as receiving no benefit from the process (see below).

Most of the mentees interviewed said that they would participate in a future peer mentoring scheme, should one be made available. Where mentees reported that they would not participate in a future scheme, this was because:

- They felt they had already gained what they needed from peer mentoring.

- They expected to move on from their organisation (e.g. due to age).

Overview of impact

This peer mentoring scheme, which involved fewer days of mentoring than previous CE schemes, had variable levels of impact. We assessed impact by triangulating mentee interview and survey data with mentor interview and reports. In analysing the evidence, we used three categories: 'considerable progress', 'some progress' and 'little progress'.

There was considerable agreement between the different sources of evidence. Where there was some disagreement between the mentor and mentee's assessment of one case, we used the mentee's own assessment.

The overall findings were that:

- 8 groups made significant progress as a result of the mentoring support.

- 6 groups benefited from the mentoring to some degree, but with limitations.

- 9 groups received little benefit from the mentoring process.

- 1 group's outcome is not known but is likely to be 'little benefit'[2].

The reasons for these different outcomes, and the types of impacts generated, are explored further below.

Significant progress as a result of mentoring support

Eight groups made significant progress through their participation in the mentoring scheme. Examples of the impacts of mentoring support on these groups are summarised here. Further insights from these examples are presented below:

- An existing CE group received support in planning a new commercial service for low carbon heat and energy efficiency, broadening their activities from a previous focus on roof-top solar installations supported by the Feed In Tariff.

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[2] This is because the mentor assigned to this group did not complete the mentoring process.

- **An existing CE group received support in consulting their local community on a potential wind (or solar generation) scheme,** and other aspects of project planning for such a scheme.

- **An existing sustainability group was able to establish a new energy champion scheme.** In this case, the mentoring scheme supplemented support that the group was receiving from another source and made a real difference in helping the group to turn their plans into reality.

- **A sustainability/regeneration group was able to identify a realistic first sustainable energy project** that was consistent with the funding and resources they had available.

- **A new sustainability group was supported on financial modelling and project planning for a potential solar project,** including the identification of the need to set up a new Community Benefit Society.

- **An emerging CE group received support that helped them to develop as an organisation,** through the mentor sharing template documents with them and acting as a sounding board for their decision-making about three potential projects.
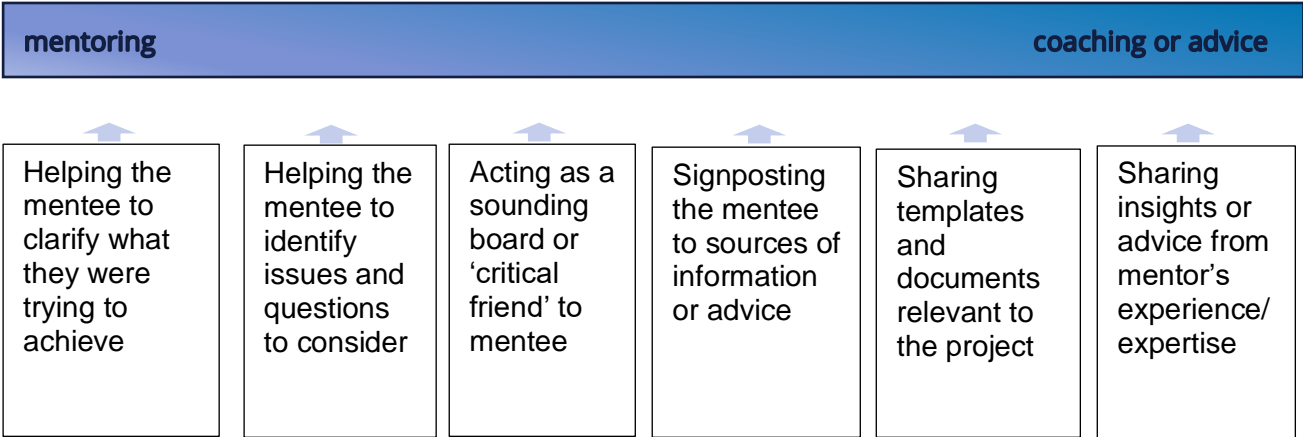
The 8 mentee groups that made most progress as a result of mentoring support tended to have well-defined mentoring needs such as:

- Specific projects or studies that they wanted help with (e.g. shifting from doing roof top solar PV to offering low carbon heat and/or energy efficiency advice).

- Project ideas that were potentially viable (e.g. solar or onshore wind projects; energy champion services).

- Specific problems on which their mentor could offer insight/expertise (e.g. community engagement tasks; technologies such as wind, solar or energy efficiency that their mentor knew about).

- Organisational needs on which the mentor could share their experiences and signpost to sources of help (e.g. setting up a Community Benefit Society; establishing rules and policies for an emerging group).

The 8 groups that made most progress included 3 emerging groups that were not yet incorporated as well as 2 established sustainability/regeneration groups that were new to community energy and 3 established CE groups.

The types of support that mentors provided to these groups could be seen as extending beyond 'mentoring' into more 'advisory' or 'coaching' support.

Figure 1: Types of support provided to mentees who made significant progress

mentoring					coaching or advice
Helping the mentee to clarify what they were trying to achieve	Helping the mentee to identify issues and questions to consider	Acting as a sounding board or 'critical friend' to mentee	Signposting the mentee to sources of information or advice	Sharing templates and documents relevant to the project	Sharing insights or advice from mentor's experience/ expertise

Source: CAG Consultants, based on Co-operatives UK Mentor Handbook (2021)

Several mentee groups in this category described their mentor as playing a 'critical friend' role, helping to clarify their thoughts, build their networks and act as a sounding board.

> *[Mentor] has been really helpful and connected us with some very useful people. I've enjoyed our joint sessions and feel all parties have benefited from the discussions and suggestions. (Mentee interview)*

In one case, the mentor provided independent scrutiny of a report that was being prepared for the mentee by a consultant (funded by RCEF). The mentee wanted to ensure that the consultant's assumptions had been reviewed and challenged where necessary. The mentee helped to focus the mentor's input by highlighting specific issues that they wanted to discuss ahead of each one to one meeting. This made the mentor's input particularly useful.

> *Having someone like [mentor] was such a step up the learning curve. That was massively powerful – it really moved things forward. (Mentee interview)*

One mentee group made significant progress with a potential wind project. In this case, the mentor provided support in helping the groups to think things through, acting as a sounding board and, to some degree, signposting them to resources. For example, the mentor and mentee discussed the process of engaging the community and obtaining planning permission for a wind turbine. The mentor also encouraged the mentee to think about more technical issues such as energy loads and grid connections. The mentor provided input to an online webinar organised by the mentee group, responding to questions from the community about wind projects.

> *So, [mentor's] input was therefore was [..] on the technical elements of making sure we were considering the things that were important from a technical viewpoint on the project, but also in our consultation with the community was able to bring that real experience of having gone through*

the process of putting up a turbine and hearing people's local views about it before. [..] I think the support that [mentor] gave was, was great and he's going to really know this stuff. So that one to one element of it was really good. (Mentee interview)

One mentor commented that a mentee wanted advice on how to communicate with their community but felt constrained that mentors were not supposed to provide advice. Different mentors seem to have differed in quite where they set the boundary on providing advice, with some sharing templates and documents from projects similar to those being undertaken by the mentees.

[Mentor] is fab! He is so knowledgeable, willing to share plans and documents with us and has been an invaluable support. (Mentee survey)

Two of the mentee groups in this category received more extensive support, from different mentors. In both cases, this involved advice on how to establish and launch energy advice services. In one of these cases, where further funding was available to supplement the Next Generation mentoring funding, the mentee group received further training from the mentor and was able to train a team of 7 energy champions.

It has increased their confidence and knowledge. It was a new thing for them to do. They are a really great group, but volunteers. [The] main benefit was having the confidence and the structure and understanding how it might work in their local area.. [..] The key benefit was coming up with a plan for how they would deliver this service and tailor to their local residents. Then it was great that they got the funding so [mentor organisation] could give them the energy advice training. And now they have a team of 7 energy champions. (Mentor interview)

Some benefit from mentoring, but with limitations

Six further mentee groups reported that they benefited from the mentoring process but their feedback was qualified by perceived limitations. All of the mentee groups that benefited, but with limitations, were existing groups: five were existing CE groups while one was an existing sustainability/regeneration group.

The benefits and impacts for these groups included:

- Helping the group to move forwards with some of its projects (e.g. by providing insights or advice on common problems or signposting to available resources).

- Helping the group to understand better the issues involved in a potential project.

- Helping the group to think strategically.

- Acting as a sounding board and giving the group confidence that they were on the right track.

- Motivating the group to keep things going and progress actions between mentoring sessions.

The types of limitations that they reported included:

- **Non-viability:** The mentor helped them to clarify issues relating to the mentee group's project idea, but the end result was that the project did not appear viable. This may have saved time for the mentee group but it left them feeling frustrated as they did not have viable ideas to take forward.

    We would have liked to get more insight into what other groups are doing and what is being successful. So [the mentoring process] helped bring our project to a head, but we don't really have any clear idea about where to go next. (Mentee interview)

- **Mismatch:** there was a mismatch between the issues covered by the mentor and the topics which the mentee would most like to have covered (e.g. mentor provided support on strategic issues where the mentee would have liked to discuss more 'nitty gritty' issues about running a community-led retrofit business).

    I would have liked to concentrate more on the nuts and bolts of running a business, how to engage with insulation installers and stuff like that. It ended up being about strategy, good stuff, but not [what] I was interested in going for in the first place. (Mentee interview)

- **Not quite achieving what they had hoped:** In one case, the real issue for the mentee was that one individual wanted to upskill other members of their group so that they could step back from the organisation, but this did not happen in practice.

    What happened in practice was that the process helped me to get to grips with some of our existing projects, and we have now moved some forward - the downside of this is that it is harder for me to exit. On the plus side I now have some projects that are in a position to be passed on to someone. (Mentee interview)

- **Too short:** the mentoring process being too short to help the mentee group make significant progress with their project. This limitation was cited by some mentees who had only received joint mentoring rather than one to one mentoring. It was exacerbated in some cases by problems fixing times for meetings, owing to the mentor (and/or mentee) being busy.

    On a practical level [it] was OK, but it felt a little rushed, as there were three of us in the session, each of us didn't have that long to talk about our stuff, [so it] felt like we were rushing toward the end. (Mentee interview)

    We have had quite a lot of hold-ups in our appointments for discussion, some due to Covid, some due to [mentor's] workload. So we are not as far down the line as I had hoped at the beginning. (Mentee survey)

Little benefit from mentoring process

For 9 mentee groups, the mentee appears to have derived little benefit from the peer mentoring programme. While two of these groups were existing CE groups, three were new community energy groups and four were existing sustainability groups that were new to community energy. This suggests that offering peer mentoring support to groups new to community energy is particularly challenging.

Some of the reasons related to **external factors** relating to the early stage of the mentee's development or the mentee group's situation rather than the mentoring process itself. For example:

- Two mentee groups had hoped to discuss potential new projects but were not successful in getting funding for the project. As the project was not going ahead, they felt that there was no point in discussing this project with their mentor.

- Two other groups were too small or insufficiently far advanced to benefit. For example, at least one group had limited capacity to take forward ideas discussed during mentoring sessions. One mentee group had hoped to be at the stage of launching their organisation. As this had been delayed beyond the end of the mentoring scheme, for external reasons, they did not feel ready to receive mentoring support.

  When we met, [mentor] was great, obviously knew his stuff. We would like to work with him as a mentor when we are set up, but recognise that the mentoring scheme will have closed by then. (Mentee interview)

- In a couple of cases, the mentee group was not in a position to benefit from the mentoring process because of their own personal commitments or lack of clarity within their group.

In other cases, the reason for lack of benefit was more directly related to the **mentoring set-up**. This was ascribed to lack of clarity on mentoring needs, to a mismatch between the mentor and mentee or (in one case) to lack of follow-up by the mentor. For example:

- In a few cases, the lack of clear benefit to the mentee was related to the mentee's lack of clarity as to what their 'problem' was and what support that they needed. One mentor commented that the mentor's role in such cases became more like 'personal coaching' rather than 'peer mentoring'.

  [We] wanted advice on what we could/should do with our CE group - as [mentor organisation] has been through it all themselves. (Mentee interview)

  So support was more like personal coaching, and thinking through the things [they] could do to make progress locally. (Mentor interview)

- In other cases, the mentee group felt that their mentor could not add much value to their situation. For example, one mentee felt that there was a mismatch between

their mentor's urban experience and their need for support on the issues facing a small rural Community Energy group. In this case, the mentee also mentioned that the group did not do enough to 'focus' the mentoring opportunity.

Not really worked for us. Not [mentor's] fault. He is a big conurbation and we are small rural. We also didn't pay enough attention and give enough resources to the opportunity. (Mentee survey)

One mentor did not follow up after initial meetings with their mentee groups. There was evidence that this mentor's mentees did not receive the support they had hoped.[3]

[Mentor] was due to send us some material - not sure whether he did; if he did, it wasn't of any use. From memory, we did chase him once but then gave up. (Mentee interview)

Finally, one inexperienced group was put off by the high level of experience of other CE groups in their 'peer mentoring' group. This group was at an early stage of their CE journey and did not feel that their needs were fully understood. They would have preferred to be matched to 'peers' (e.g. other organisations who were new to community energy).

I feel that we didn't fit their idea of who they would be mentoring - they wanted to help people who were further along. We weren't given any choice of mentor. And no-one really probed to find out what we hoped to get out of it. (Mentee interview)

A couple of groups, including this less experienced mentee group, commented that they never received the one to one support that they needed.

After that initial group meeting, there was nothing - we never managed to get a one to one meeting. (Mentee interview)

Summary of success factors

In summary, the peer mentoring process generated more impact where:

The mentee:

- Had specific projects or studies that they wanted help with.

- Had project ideas that were potentially viable.

- Was able to focus the mentor's input on specific 'problems', issues or questions.

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[3] This mentor effectively dropped out of the scheme and did not claim any mentor allowances from Co-operatives UK/CSE. The evaluation was unable to obtain feedback from the mentor about the reason for their withdrawal from the scheme, despite repeated attempts.

- Was well-matched with other mentees/mentor in their group.

The mentor:

- Had the skills/experience that the mentee was looking for.

- Took time to understand the mentee's real needs/expectations.

- Provided at least some one to one support to the mentee.

- Made time for meetings within a reasonable timeframe.

- Was diligent in providing follow-up support between meetings.

There were mixed results for emerging groups and groups new to community energy. Some experienced significant benefits from the mentoring process but others reported low levels of benefit, either because the mentoring process did not meet their needs or because they lacked the funding/capacity/opportunity to take forward learning from the mentoring process at the time. Further thought may be needed on how best to support emerging groups and those completely new to community energy.

The next chapter presents findings on the design and delivery of this peer mentoring scheme, to inform the design of future peer mentoring schemes in the community energy sector.

3. Design and delivery of the peer mentoring scheme

We have considered the design and delivery of this scheme in some detail, to inform the design of future peer mentoring schemes in the community energy sector. Our findings on design and delivery are presented below under the following headings:

- Planning for the scheme
- Budget for the peer mentoring scheme
- Aims of this peer mentoring scheme
- Use of mentee groups
- Timing of scheme development
- Recruitment of peer mentors
- Recruitment of mentees
- Matching of mentors and mentees
- Briefing and handholding
- Virtual vs face to face mentoring
- The mentoring process
- Networking platform - Loomio
- Timescales and time inputs

Planning for the scheme

CSE and Co-operatives UK originally prepared a concept note in September 2020 for a mentoring scheme focused on Part A and Part B groups (i.e. community energy groups involved in the Next Generation programme), involving relatively intense peer support between these 15 groups. This concept was revised in response to feedback from Power to Change, expanding the support to 40 groups and introducing the idea of 'mentee groups' or 'cohorts'. The appetite for peer mentoring was tested with the community energy sector at the Community Energy England Practitioners Conference in November 2020. Practitioners supported the development of a peer mentoring scheme, with a narrow majority favouring mentoring in groups or cohorts rather than one to one. Appendix A presents the revised proposal prepared for Power to Change by CSE and Co-operatives UK in December 2020, setting out the rationale for the peer mentoring scheme and proposing how it should work.

While the Next Generation programme as a whole started in early 2019, detailed planning for the peer mentoring work started in late 2020. The original rationale was that Part C of the programme would share learning that emerged from Parts A and B so Part C should start part-way through Parts A and B.

As described above, CSE and Power to Change agreed that Part C should support wider peer learning between community energy and similar groups, not restricted to learning from the Next Generation programme. We understand that this was partly a response to the deferred timetable for Parts A and B, which were significantly delayed by the effects of the

Covid pandemic, and partly a recognition that there was useful learning to be shared from outside as well as within the Next Generation programme.

Power to Change expressed a view that, with hindsight, it might have been useful for detailed planning for Part C to have started at an earlier stage of the Next Generation programme. This could, for example, have allowed the delivery timescale to be extended which could have had benefits for the mentoring process.

> *Learning point: although Part C of the Next Generation programme was not due to start until late 2020, it might have been useful for all parties to start planning this element of the programme earlier so that design and timing of the mentoring process could be optimised.*

Budget for the peer mentoring scheme

The budget for the peer mentoring scheme was just over £27,000 plus VAT. There was discussion and dialogue between Power to Change and the delivery partners (CSE and Co-operatives UK) during the planning process for the peer mentoring scheme. This included discussion of the aims of the scheme and a realistic budget. More time was added for programme management during this process. However, the evaluation findings suggest that the scale of the budget constrained some elements of scheme design.

We understand that, at this level of budget, this was expected to be a 'light touch' scheme compared to other peer mentoring schemes in the community energy sector, in terms of the level of peer mentoring provided and the handholding provided to participants in the scheme. For example, Co-operatives UK reported that there was insufficient budget to allow them to undertake a scoping call with each mentee ahead of allocating them to a mentor. Such calls are common practice on similar schemes such as the Hive mentoring scheme and the 2015/16 community energy mentoring scheme. While mentees needs were defined through a mentee survey, some mentors reported that they had to spend time clarifying the needs of their mentee at the start of the mentoring process. Some mentors and mentees also reported that the process of matching mentors to mentees might have been improved if needs had been clarified at the outset.

Power to Change were responsive to a small budget adjustment that was made towards the end of the scheme and stated in interview that they might have been open to consider broader changes to the budget if a strong case had been presented.

> *Learning point: the 'light touch' approach to the mentoring scheme had some downsides. A more generous budget would have helped the peer mentoring scheme to identify and support the widely varying needs of a highly varied cohort of mentees.*

Aims of this peer mentoring scheme

The Community Energy Peer Mentoring programme aimed to offer the opportunity for up to 40 community energy groups in England, and other community actors in England who were

interested in energy-related projects, to benefit from free outside expert support on a wide range of issues, from finance to PR and microgrids to renewable heat.[4] Owing to issues in recruiting mentees, outlined further below, the scheme eventually provided support to 24 community energy groups.

Co-operatives UK defined 'peer mentoring' as a relationship in which an organisation (via the key people in it) is supported through a learning or developmental journey. This concept was used in the 2015/16 community energy peer mentoring programme and also in Co-operatives UK's Hive programme for cooperative businesses.

The 'peer mentoring' process was described by Co-operatives UK as 'reflecting, encouraging and supporting the new or existing community energy group to make the most of its potential', rather than providing expert guidance or advice. As shown in Table 1 below, this was expected to involve more of a two-way flow of learning between the mentor and mentee, in contrast to the more one-way flow of learning involved in an advisory or consultancy relationship.

Table 1: Role of mentor compared to role of adviser or coach

	Adviser	Coach	Mentor
Focus	Guiding	Task and performance, building skills and competence	Building capability
Key skills	Imparting own experience and wisdom	Give feedback on performance	Helping mentees discover their own knowledge and experience
Goal orientation	Helps align individual and organisational goals	Helps coachee establish personal goals	Usually works with mentee's own goals
Closeness of relationship	Low-moderate	Moderate	Relatively high, can lead to a strong friendship

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[4] Mentor handbook, May 2021.

	Adviser	Coach	Mentor
Flow of learning	Mainly one-way	Mainly one-way	Usually two-way

Source: Mentor handbook 2021, prepared by Co-operatives UK.

Consistent with this understanding of 'peer mentoring', Co-operatives UK guidance asked mentors not to give specific 'advice' to mentees. The Mentor Handbook explained that mentors should help mentees to solve their own problems rather than solving problems for them:

- Peer mentors were not expected to give legal or technical advice that their mentees would rely on (e.g. that might 'push' them towards a decision or course of action); but

- Peer mentors were encouraged to share their experiences around technologies, share experiences of other schemes and projects, share templates, provide options, offer 'guidance' and signpost mentees to further resources and advice (e.g. providing a 'pull' or encouragement for the mentees to find their own way forward).

The mentee and mentor interviews suggest that many of the mentees wanted some elements of guidance or advice, at least in terms of the mentor sharing their experience. Mentors were not always clear about the boundaries of their peer mentoring role in terms of giving advice:

> *Guidance says not to give specific advice, I found that really hard to do, I ended up giving specific advice in a lot of cases. [..] I did try and ask open ended questions, to get them to think for themselves, but in the end they were really looking for me to share my experience, that is what they find most valuable… (Mentor interview)*

Where the mentor-mentee relationship was reported to work well, as described in the previous chapter, this was often because the mentor shared their experiences and – to some degree - provided guidance or advice on a specific issue or project. In some cases, this may have included elements of 'technical advice' (e.g. on specific aspects of wind projects or energy advice schemes). In a few cases, the mentor went on to provide 'advice' (paid or unpaid) after the end of the funded programme.

Despite this lack of clarity, there was evidence of the benefits of support being provided via a peer mentor rather than a paid consultant or adviser:

- One mentee commented that there were advantages to speaking to a fellow practitioner rather than a consultant, as they were working with someone with a shared outlook and values. This helped to build trust and to ensure a flexible approach to support.

- Some mentors also commented that a mentee-led rather than advisor-led process would generate longer term benefits by helping to develop the mentee's capability.

The interesting thing, particularly with [mentee] was there was a degree of reassurance that was going on. So [it was about] leading people through their own ideas and thoughts. It is a really important balance – how far you go as a mentor in saying 'this is how you do it'. […] Particularly when you've only got a couple of days [per group], you don't come in and say 'right, this is what you do'. [..] And then a month or two later, they think 'oh, what was it you said?' (Mentor interview)

Learning point: *more clarity was needed as to the types of guidance or advice that could legitimately be given by peer mentors and whether (for at least some types of mentees) an element of coaching or advice from fellow practitioners might have been appropriate.*

Use of mentee groups

This mentoring scheme aimed to provide peer mentoring in small groups (with one mentor and 3-4 mentees) rather than one to one. The primary aim was to encourage ongoing networking and peer learning. For example, the expected benefits outlined in Appendix A included 'Multi-way relationships – mentors are facilitators/convenors but also have the opportunity to widen/test knowledge and understanding'.

A secondary aim was to reach more mentees than could be reached via a one to one mentoring scheme, given the budget allocated to this mentoring scheme. The group approach to mentoring was an experiment that was not wholly successful, as described further under 'matching' and 'process' below.

A few of the 'one to one' sessions were really 'one to many' sessions, since in some cases the mentor met with multiple representatives from the mentee organisation. For example, one mentor ran sessions attended by 8 members of a single mentee organisation. Co-operatives UK guidance for mentors was framed in terms of mentoring for 'mentee organisations' and did not specify that the mentoring should only involve one individual within the mentee organisation.

Meetings involving multiple mentees from different organisations were harder to arrange. Their usefulness depended on the 'fit' between the different mentees. Our overall assessment is that the mentee group approach only worked well in a few cases, with most mentees wanting one to one mentoring on their own issues.

Learning point: *while the mentee group approach was successful in a small number of cases (where mentees were well-matched in terms of their mentoring needs and level of experience), most of the mentees really wanted one to one support for their organisation and the mentee group approach had to be adapted to allow this.*

Timing of scheme development

Having started in late 2020, the development of the peer mentoring scheme was further delayed by various factors. Some of the delay factors were beyond the control of the scheme organisers: for example, recruitment of mentors was undertaken in February but recruitment of mentees took considerably longer than anticipated for reasons explained below. The scheme was dependent on the skills of an experienced staff member at Co-operatives UK who was unavailable, for personal reasons, during May 2021. The scheme launched in July 2021. The original closure date was November 2021 but this was extended to allow the scheme to run for six months to January 2022, with this end date being chosen to coincide with the expected end of the main Next Generation programme. The July to January timing meant that the summer holiday and festive holiday periods reduced the effective length of the scheme to under 6 months.

In practice, the Next Generation programme was extended by several months so it might have been possible to take a more flexible approach to the end of the mentoring programme, if the budget, management arrangements and mentor availability had allowed this. In a few cases, mentoring support was given beyond end January, on an informal basis, but this extension was not uniformly applied across the 9 mentors.

> *Learning point: it might have been possible to further extend the scheme in the light of evolving delays to the Next Generation programme. (The length of the scheme is considered separately below.)*

Recruitment of peer mentors

Mentors were recruited through publicity and outreach work during January and February 2021. Co-operatives UK was proactive in contacting mentors who had previously been involved in the earlier Co-operatives UK mentoring programme.

Sixteen applications were received from potential mentors of whom 10 were selected for the scheme. CSE and Co-operatives UK assessed potential mentors against the following criteria:

- Their motivation to be a mentor and ability/previous experience at mentoring.

- Their previous project experience and skills.

- Their experience of new technology and post-subsidy business models.

Six of the 10 mentors had been involved in Part B of the Next Generation programme, but 4 had not previously been involved in Next Generation. The mentors interviewed for this research were strongly committed to helping others in the community energy sector: some already undertook informal monitoring on an unpaid basis. The funding offered by the programme enabled them to commit more time to this type of process.

> *Mentoring fits the ethos of the community energy sector. Given that we are so geographically separate, there is no sense of competition. There is a general sense of openness and desire to share which lends itself to this kind of programme. (Mentor interview)*

Learning point: *there was no problem selecting good mentors for the scheme, possibly because of the culture of mutual support within the sector and the history of peer mentoring within the community energy sector.*

Community groups with bright ideas for energy innovation to benefit from new peer support

News item

Published
19th January 2021

Last updated
20th January 2021

Topic
Co-op development

Share

Community energy groups across England will benefit from a new peer support programme to help develop new innovative business models.

Recruitment of mentees

Recruitment of mentees was more problematic, requiring two waves of publicity. The first wave was publicised to potential mentees via websites and newsletters, including the Co-operatives UK newsletter, the CSE newsletter and Community Energy England newsletter. The initial mentoring offer aimed to attract applications from mentees who were interested in energy innovation (to maximise learning from Part B of the Next Generation programme). A webinar was run by CSE in early March 2021 to share details and answer questions about the peer mentoring programme. This first wave generated fewer than 10 applications from potential mentees by the closing date in mid-March, compared to the target of 40 mentees.

CSE and Co-operatives UK discussed the situation with Power to Change and, with their agreement, decided to broaden the scope of mentee recruitment. Their analysis was that the emphasis on 'innovation' was daunting to newer and smaller community energy groups, since relatively few groups had the capacity to consider new business models. Power to Change agreed that CSE and Co-operatives UK should broaden the scope of the scheme to include groups at an earlier stage who required support on any aspect of community energy, not just on innovative business models. A second wave of publicity materials was shared with a wider audience, including CSE's climate emergency networks. Some mentors also encouraged groups that they knew needed help to join the scheme. In interview, the mentees reported that they had heard about the scheme via a number of routes including the Community Energy England newsletter, the RCEF newsletter, Power to Change, the Big

Local Trust, Co-operatives UK and the Climate Emergency website. The most commonly-cited source was Community Energy England.

The inclusion of climate emergency audiences attracted some groups that were considering work on energy but were at an early stage (e.g. parish councils and unincorporated groups). While the broadening increased the number of mentee recruits, it resulted in a broader spread of mentees, with some newer mentees having different and less well-defined mentoring needs. This made matching of mentors and mentees more problematic (see next sub-section).

The second wave of recruitment generated a total of 35 applications by the final deadline at the end of May 2021. These were shortlisted and assessed, resulting in a total of 26 groups being accepted initially. This was lower than the original target of 40 mentees but was judged to be enough to set up groups of 2-3 mentee organisations for each of the mentors. Reasons for rejection of mentees included poor quality applications or groups not meeting Power to Change's criteria for a community business (e.g. not being locally rooted, with community support). A couple of groups withdrew, so a total of 24 groups were offered mentoring. While three mentees were from organisations (or were partners of organisations) involved in Parts A or B of the Next Generation programme, most came from organisations outside the Next Generation programme. Six of the 15 mentees interviewed by the evaluation had experience of other mentoring schemes, within or outside the community energy sector. It is possible that this prior experience may have encouraged them to apply for the scheme.

> **Learning point:** *recruitment of mentees was initially challenging, possibly because of the emphasis on mentees being interested in 'innovation'. While broadening the criteria for mentees helped to increase numbers, this extended the scheme to include less experienced groups and made delivery of the 'mentee group' approach more problematic.*

Matching of mentors and mentees

The mentee application form asked potential mentees to indicate which topics they were interested in, under two headings: business support and development; and energy technologies. It also asked about the legal status of their organisation (e.g. unincorporated, Community Benefit Society, charitable organisation etc). As the list of mentors was available to mentees during the application process, mentees were also able to request a particular mentor.

CSE and Co-operatives UK did their best to match the needs of mentee groups to the known expertise of the available mentors, taking account of their needs and stated preferences and aiming to create groups of 2-3 mentees for each mentor with broadly similar needs. One mentor was dropped from the programme because there was no call for their areas of expertise (i.e. heat networks), so the final line-up involved 9 mentors supporting 24 mentees. There was no need to consider location when matching mentors and mentees because the mentoring process was virtual. The virtual format allowed inclusion of one mentor based outside the UK.

The matching process worked better for some groups than others. Interviews with mentors and mentees indicated that some groups were relatively well-matched. For example, a mentor specialising in wind projects was allocated three mentees that were considering or were progressing wind projects. And one mentor/mentee group worked so well that they continued to meet on a six-weekly basis, beyond the formal mentoring programme, as a form of peer support group.

> *We get on really well and we just wanted to keep contact because we thought it was really useful. That's going to be useful for me as well as them. [..] I think it's every six weeks we meet up [on zoom]. ..And if we've got things to talk about, we'll talk about it. If not, that's fine. [..] that's something that's come out of the peer mentoring.. (mentor interview)*

But interview evidence suggests that other groups were less well-matched, both in terms of the match between mentor and mentee, and in terms of the match between mentees within the group. For example, one mentee from a rural area reported that their mentor had experience of urban settings only and commented that this limited the relevance of their experience and support. Another mentee whose PV project faced grid constraints was matched with a mentor who did not have experience of this. While mentors were not expected to give 'technical advice', they were still expected to draw on and share their own experiences so the nature of their experience was relevant.

In another example, a mentee group involved groups at very different stages of development: this was daunting for a new group who wanted to be in a group with 'peers' who were also at an early stage of development. One suggestion, from an experienced mentor, was to invite (or at least allow) applications from mentee/mentor combinations who had already identified their own 'fit'.

> *Learning point: more time could have been taken to clarify mentee needs at an early stage (e.g. through an initial call before they were allocated to a mentor). This would have helped to improve matching between mentors and mentees. Matching could also have been improved by targeting the scheme more tightly (e.g. at groups with more similar levels of experience or more similar needs).*

Briefing and handholding

Both mentors and mentees were issued with a mentor/mentee handbook, prepared by Co-operatives UK. These handbooks, adapted for Next Generation from Co-operatives UK's previous mentoring schemes, explained the context to the scheme, set out processes and procedures, defined a code of contact and gave advice on establishing a successful relationship with mentors/mentees. The mentor handbook set out the differences between mentoring and advice, provided tools for mentors and signposted people to sources of additional help on mentoring.

Co-operatives UK reported that there was an online briefing session for mentors before the start of the scheme. However, some mentors commented that it would have been useful to have more briefing and networking between mentors before or during the scheme.

After the initial briefing, mentors were asked to get in touch with their mentees to arrange an initial meeting of their mentee group. Co-operatives UK were available to deal with queries raised by the mentors or mentees and were reported to have responded promptly when asked. However, some mentees commented that Co-operatives UK could have been more proactive in checking directly with mentees whether mentoring arrangements were working. One mentoring group did not progress beyond its initial meeting, owing to the mentor effectively withdrawing, and some mentees in this group would have appreciated being moved to another mentor.

Co-operatives UK commented that only 7 out of 24 mentees completed the short final feedback survey which Co-operatives UK sent out at the end of the programme. This perhaps reflected the low level of contact and engagement between the mentees and Co-operatives UK during the programme.

> *Learning point: initial briefing for mentors was good but it might have been helpful for the scheme organisers to have provided more handholding for mentors and mentees during the mentoring programme, if the budget had permitted this (e.g. initial call with mentees; networking for mentors; occasional check-in with mentees by the scheme organiser).*

Virtual vs face to face mentoring

Mentoring was provided almost entirely online, with only one face to face visit reported across the scheme. This was primarily because the Covid pandemic made visits inadvisable. Side benefits of the virtual format were that geography was not a consideration in matching mentors and mentees, and that travel costs were avoided.

Some mentors commented that the virtual format enabled them to participate. But some mentees would have preferred a face to face process which enabled them to develop a deeper, longer-term relationship with their mentor. For example, some would have preferred to have a local mentor who could visit their project. It is not clear whether a face to face process would actually have generated more benefits or whether this was primarily a perception amongst mentees.

> *Learning point: there were pro's and con's of virtual vs face to face mentoring. While it was logistically easier to organise a virtual mentoring scheme, consideration could be given to face to face mentoring, with a view to comparing the impacts of virtual versus face to face monitoring.*

The mentoring process

Evidence from mentor and mentee interviews indicate that the approaches taken by different groups included:

- 1 or more joint sessions involving one mentor and multiple mentees.

- One to one online sessions (typically 3-6 sessions each lasting about 1 hour, over the space of 6 months) involving the mentor together with 1 or more representatives from a specific mentee organisation.

- Email correspondence between sessions.

- Signposting to resources and/or sharing of templates, models and so on.

Some successful groups used a mix of some joint sessions with multiple mentees (allowing sharing of lessons in a group setting) and some one to one sessions (allowing a focus on the specific issues relevant to that group).

The mentors varied in their level of commitment and time input.

- Most of the mentors organised multiple calls with each mentee (or with their groups of mentees). Some also shared documents and dealt with email correspondence between calls.

- One mentor organised fortnightly calls with their two mentees, alternating between one to one and joint sessions. This group was particularly successful in establishing rapport and was reported to be continuing beyond the scheme. Another success factor here may have been that the mentees were themselves fairly experienced so learning was two-way within the group. It is not clear whether the mentor was able to achieve this within the allowance of 4.25 days.

- Other mentors had more limited contact with some of their mentees. Reasons for this were partly practical (e.g. busy diaries on the part of both the mentor and mentee) and partly mentoring related (e.g. the mentor was not clear how best to support the mentee – e.g. because they did not have appropriate expertise or because the needs of the mentee were very broad and non-specific).

- One mentor was reported to have dropped out of the programme after an initial session with their mentees. The reasons for this are unclear. While this mentor was not paid by the programme, this left several mentees without the support they had expected.

Mentees also varied in their level of commitment. The mentoring process worked best when the mentee had a clear idea of what they wanted from the mentoring process and helped to focus the mentor's time on their 'problem'. This was more straightforward for individual mentees than for multiple mentees from a specific organisation, since the latter situation brought potential for disagreement on what the 'problem' was. A few mentees did not fully engage with the mentoring process, either because of personal factors (e.g. the mentee's own circumstances changing) or other external factors (e.g. the group not receiving funding for a specific project and therefore not needing help in taking it forward).

> ***Learning points:*** *the mentoring process worked best where the mentor and mentee(s) were both committed to the process, where the mentor and mentee(s) were well matched, where the mentee was able to focus discussions on a specific 'problem' that*

they wanted to resolve, and where the mentor was able to organise one to one sessions as well as joint sessions.

Networking platform - Loomio

To support peer networking, both mentors and mentees were encouraged to use Community Energy England's Loomio platform as a channel to ask questions and share learning with other community energy groups. The original intention had been for the peer mentoring programme to use a separate channel within the Loomio platform but this was not fully implemented due to budget constraints. Loomio could only be accessed by members of Community Energy England, but Co-operatives UK negotiated an arrangement by which mentee organisations could have free membership of Community Energy England for a year so that they could access Loomio free of charge.

While a few mentors and mentees described Loomio as useful, the platform was not widely accessed or used by mentoring participants. Reasons for this included:

- Mentees not fully understanding what Loomio could offer or how to access the platform via Community Energy England.

- Mentees being concerned about confidentiality as a barrier to sharing information, possibly not fully understanding that the Loomio platform is only open to Community Energy practitioners, with no access by funders or other stakeholders.

- A few mentees not being confident with computers and related technology.

- There being little activity on Loomio when accessed.

Mentors suggested that less confident mentees may have felt daunted by the highly technical points put on Loomio by more experienced members of the Community Energy community. They were perhaps more likely to 'listen' than to post questions on Loomio.

These points were self-reinforcing since low levels of Loomio participation made the platform less useful to those who did manage to access it. One mentor commented that Loomio could have been a powerful networking tool, if implemented more effectively.

> *If all groups had signed up to the Loomio CEE forum - there would be a massive network of community energy there. (Mentor interview)*

Learning point: *the online platform Loomio was not used to its full potential, because of difficulties with platform access and low levels of activity on the platform. It is possible that these could have been overcome if the scheme organisers' roles had included more proactive stimulation of cohort discussions on Loomio.*

Timescales and time inputs

The Next Generation mentoring scheme allowed 4.25 days for each mentor, across all their mentees. Allowing 0.25 days for mentor briefing and feedback survey, and 1 day for joint meetings, this meant that there was only 1-1.5 days per mentee for one to one work with each mentee (depending whether there were 2 or 3 mentees in the group). In contrast, the HIVE scheme allows 6 days of one to one consultancy support and up to 3 days of one to one peer mentoring support.

Many mentors and mentees would have welcomed a longer timescale for the mentoring process, involving more mentoring days across a longer and more flexible timeframe. For example:

- Where a mentee was trying to progress a specific project (e.g. a wind turbine), both the mentor and mentee commented that they would benefit from mentoring support over the whole 2-3 year preparation process, not just 6 months.

- Where a mentee was at an earlier stage, trying to establish or develop their group and decide what priorities to focus on, the 6-month mentoring process could give them initial ideas but did not allow the mentor to support them on their subsequent journey.

In one case, a mentee had problems finding suitable diary date with the mentor and was then surprised and disappointed to be told that the timescale for mentoring support had run out.

Learning point: if funding had allowed, the mentoring scheme could have generated more benefits if it had been less 'light touch' and had extended over a longer period.

The next chapter summarises our recommendations from this evaluation.

4. Learning and recommendations for future peer mentoring schemes

Overall, there was considerable support for future peer mentoring in the community energy sector from both mentors and mentees. Several of the mentors had themselves benefited a great deal from previous mentoring schemes and were very willing to give back. One mentor commented that mentoring fitted the 'open' ethos of the CE sector, where groups tended to cooperate rather than compete, possibly because they are rarely competing with other groups in their geographical area.

The isolation imposed by Covid was cited as increasing the need for scheme of this nature.

> *It's a good idea. It's been difficult the last couple of years with lots of delays due to Covid. (Mentee interview)*

> *I know how challenging it is, you are working from nothing, if you can get advice from people who have done it, it is extremely valuable, could help you avoid doing things which are going to be a waste of time, because time is so important, most of them are volunteers. (Mentor interview)*

Community Energy groups were reported to have a desire to share which lends itself to this kind of programme. Many of the mentors described themselves as habitually providing some free advice to other community energy groups. Payment for mentors was important, as it enabled them to dedicate more time and resources to providing this advice amongst competing commitments.

> *There is a lot of innovation going on. The cool thing about the peer mentoring programme is that it was a nice start to that- to what can happen with sharing knowledge at that level, when there is dedicated resources, and I am getting paid for doing it, then I can really commit to it. (Mentor interview)*

Furthermore, this evaluation identified significant positive impacts from this mentoring scheme, despite its 'light touch' design. Eight of the 24 participating mentees derived significant benefit, with the mentoring process helping them to progress projects, develop new services or progress their organisational development. A further 6 mentees derived similar benefits but with some limitations, possibly because they tended to be more experienced CE groups that were already relatively well-advanced. While 9 mentees derived little benefit from the scheme, this was in some cases explained by external factors: for example, some groups had limited capacity to participate in the mentoring process and/or limited capacity to take forward ideas emerging from the process.

Given the history of successful peer mentoring schemes in the Community Energy sector, including this one, we recommend that peer mentoring approaches are replicated and extended within the sector.

Key recommendations for design of a future peer mentoring scheme in the community energy sector are:

- **Consider inclusion of advice:** It's important to work out whether the scheme should extend to providing some advice, or whether it should purely be a 'peer mentoring' scheme. While peer networking has many benefits, the most significant impacts from this scheme were provided by mentors who blurred the line to provide elements of advice to their mentees.

- **One to one mentoring:** If 'peer mentoring' is being provided, consider providing the main scheme on a one to one basis, involving one mentor and one organisation, with separate activities to achieve peer networking goals.

- **Resourcing:** Consider offering more mentoring days to each mentee, over a longer timeframe (e.g. 6 days over a 1 year period).

- **Screening:** Allow sufficient resources so that the scheme organisers can hold calls with potential mentees to understand their needs in more depth.

- **Targeting:** Possibly focus peer mentoring at specific types of groups at a similar stage and with well-defined needs, while providing other form(s) of support for those at a different stage and/or those with less well-defined needs.

- **Handholding**: Allow sufficient resources so that the scheme organisers can check in with mentees to ensure that the process is working as expected. Also consider bringing together the mentors periodically to share experiences and support each other.

Appendix A: CE Peer Mentoring concept note

This Appendix presents the text of a proposal prepared for Power to Change by CSE and Co-operatives UK in December 2020, with costs redacted.

Context (ref. CEE State of sector report, 2020)

Maintaining momentum in the face of and increasing barriers to viability as well as the ongoing global health crisis will be the primary challenges for community energy organisations moving into a post-subsidy 2020.

In the face of challenges, communities are still seeking to develop new low carbon projects, driving change through a variety of new and innovative means. To support this work, and to catalyse further success in 2020, the community energy sector needs:

- Continued improvements in early stage funding: enabling the development of innovative projects and new community-led business models.
- Better information and knowledge sharing: enabling communities to make informed decisions and to understand where and how to access emerging opportunities.
- Capacity building: providing greater support for expertise development, knowledge sharing and core costs across the sector, reducing time and capacity barriers, promoting professionalisation and increasing long-term impact.
- Better impact assessment: providing more effective and standardised methods of quantifying and articulating the social value and impact of community energy.

Power to Change's Next Generation Community Energy Programme

Power to Change created the Next Generation programme precisely to accelerate this needed next round of growth. The aim is to make projects replicable, and open source – so less time is spent reinventing the wheel.

The Next Generation programme has provided early stage funding and is working with 11 organisations to develop new business models for CE, test their real world application and share this learning to benefit the wider sector.

To aid information and knowledge sharing the programme has so far:

- Established the Innovation webinar series to provide a public platform (monthly 90min webinars) for Next Generation supported and other groups to share an overview of their project's learning and progress, challenges and successes, and provide the opportunity for other practitioners and stakeholders to ask questions.
- Brought together the 11 next Generation supported societies through regular facilitated group calls, exchanges and a basecamp platform to support practitioners who are 'in the thick of it' pioneering new CE models.
- Hosting open events in conjunction in CEE to help identify, share and tackle the wider challenges and opportunities in the sector.

The need for a mentoring programme

Our assumptions from conversations we've had with CEE, the evaluation on the next Generation Programme that CAG have led and the enquiries that we receive are that:

- There is a huge appetite amongst the wider CE sector and potential partners and potential partners (particularly amongst local and regional who have declared climate emergencies) to learn more about next generation and other innovation partners.
- That there is a keenness to go into more detail than the innovation lab or current events provide.
- That there is a need to test the adaptability and wider replication of the models in different contexts across the UK.
- That there is huge willingness and commitment from innovators to share their learning – but there is limited time, resources and/or structured opportunities for this at present.

Led-by Co-operatives UK who already run The HIVE support programme for Cooperatives across the UK and previously ran a CE mentoring scheme (that came to an end in back in 2015), we are proposing to pilot a peer mentoring programme for CE sector focussed on the development and replication of post-subsidy CE business models.

This would involve:

1. Match-making

Co-ops UK will lead a process to identify:

- Groups who would like to receive mentoring and topics they would like to be mentored on
- Groups who would be willing to be mentors and the topics they would like to mentor on.
- These questions will be included in the sign-up process to the Community Energy 'Conference of Practitioners' on 9th November and in a survey shared by CSE to start getting a feel for the level and nature of interest.
- Subsequently a simple EOI / application form will be developed for groups to confirm their participation and promoted via the usual channels (CEE, Co-ops UK, CSE etc.) to reach as much of the sector as possible.
- The mentoring would happen on a 1 to 4 basis i.e. 1 mentor and 4 mentees around the topics identified in the match making process – to maximise the reach and enhance the conversations.
- Co-ops UK will provide short guidance to mentors with tips on how to run the mentoring sessions (such as the dos and don'ts around providing advice) and facilitate introductions between mentors and mentees.

2. Mentoring process

We would anticipate the mentoring session taking place between March and September 2021 – with the pace, number and length of sessions being client-led.

And taking up to a maximum of 4 days of compensated mentor's time.

3. Closing and evolving into the peer learning

- At the end of the mentoring sessions we anticipate (hope) that some groups may wish to continue learning and collaborating together independently of the mentoring programme.
- We will ask for feedback from mentors and mentees to establish how and if they wish to evolve the relationship in the medium-term.

- We will also ask if there are any issues of questions you identified and were unable to resolve and assess how those might be taken on behalf of the sector.
- And, ask what worked and what didn't; so that we can further refine, scale and develop the programme.

4. Benefits and expected impact

- Open to all (new CE groups, established CE groups, and actors who want to support CE e.g. Parish councils) who are developing post subsidy models.
- Multi-way relationships – mentors are facilitators/convenors but also have the opportunity to widen/test knowledge and understanding.
- Increased confidence and know-how in the sector to take forward new projects.
- New projects come to fruition more quickly because less time is spent reinventing the wheel.
- Evidence base for further scaling developing the mentoring programme together CEE, RCEF/BEIS and other stakeholders.

5. Budget

Grants to mentors

10 mentors work with cohorts up to 4 = 40 groups mentored

To recognise that managing a cohort more complex, so warrants additional days

£350 + VAT per day x 4 days per mentor

Programme management costs

Co-operatives UK

- Programme design, set up based on feedback from CE groups
- Design application form, criteria and assessment process, Airtable (platform to present data), application options (FormAssembly, Typeform or Google forms)
- Manage process – applications submitted via hosted on next gen, promotion via NextGen website, social media, partners etc
- Application for mentors
- Facilitate matching, cohorts and online discussion group/platform
- Code of conduct, guidance to mentors, induction and monthly check-ins
- Contracts issued
- Monitoring and collating feedback and reporting from mentors, mentees
- CUK and CSE joint data controllers as per existing heads of agreement, flow down agreement

CSE

- create survey to participants, distribute, promote, collate feedback and share results (2 days)
- hosting applications through Next Gen website and admin associated (1 days- 2 rounds of applications ie mentors and mentees)
- assessing mentor and mentee applications (3 days)
- support of Co-ops UK and programme management (2 days)
- managing grant payments (1.5 days)
- evaluation support (0.5 days)

[costs redacted]

Direct costs

Forum / platform for discussion e.g. Slack, Loomio

Slack is £6.30 per person per month so 50 for a 6 months = £1,890; discounts apply for charities

Loomio charity, non-profit is 20 US $ pm (120 US$) inc up to 10 persons, then 2 US $ per person (480 US$) = 600 US $ for 6 months (£460)

Delivery timetable

CE Peer mentoring delivery Phase 1 set up					2020							2021											
					02-Nov	09-Nov	16-Nov	23-Nov	30-Nov	07-Dec	14-Dec	11-Jan	18-Jan	25-Jan	01-Feb	08-Feb	15-Feb	22-Feb	01-Mar	08-Mar	15-Mar	22-Mar	29-Mar
Activity	Who	Dependency	CUK no. days	CSE days	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Agree process, proposal	CUK / CSE	P2C	0.5	0.5																		
Survey to NextGen participants, Innovation Lab etc	CSE			0.5																		
CE Practitioner webinar	CEE																					
Feedback collated	CSE / CEE			0.5																		
Contracts signed	CUK / CSE		0.5	0.5																		
Mentor Application drafted, assessment criteria, process	CUK	CSE	0.5	1																		
Criteria, guidance signed off, Pdf guidance produced	CUK / P2C	P2C	0.5	0.5																		
Applications open (mentors) 18 Jan	CUK	NextGen website	0.5	0.5																		
Application closes (1 Feb)	CUK																					
Assessment and agree mentors, induction	CUK	CSE	1	1																		
Applications open (mentees) 15 Feb																						
Application closes (1 Mar)																						
Assessment, agree mentees			0.5	1																		
Match with mentors, create cohorts	CUK		1																			
Induction, mentor agreements issued	CUK		1																			
mentoring commences 6 months until end Sep 2021	CUK																					
			6	6																		
Phase 2 Mar-Sep 2021																						
mentor delivery CUK 1.5 days pm			9																			
CSE programme management, grant management, evaluation				4																		
TOTAL DAYS			15	10																		

Appendix B: List of mentors and mentees

Mentors (9)

Jonathan Atkinson, Carbon Coop
Ben Dodd, Green Fox Community Energy
Pete Capener, Bath and West Community Energy
Toby Costin, CREW Energy
Will Cottrell, Brighton Energy Coop
Kayla Ente, Brighton and Hove Energy Services Company
Gill Fenna, Quantum Strategy and Technology
Simon Tilley, Hockerton Housing Project
Richard Watson/Kate Meakin, Energise Sussex

Mentee organisations (24)

Organisation name	Organisation scope	New group?	New to community energy?	Type of technology/ project/ need
Brockham Parish Council	Sustainability and Regeneration	no	yes	various
Community Energy Birmingham	Energy	no	no	various
Croydon Community Energy	Energy	yes	yes	various
Durham Villages Community Power (CIC)	Energy	no	no	various
Grand Union Community Energy Ltd. (GUCE)	Energy	no	no	various

Organisation name	Organisation scope	New group?	New to community energy?	Type of technology/ project/ need
Great Bedwyn Village Hall and Playfields Charity	Sustainability and Regeneration	no	yes	various
Haltwhistle Partnership	Sustainability and Regeneration	no	yes	various
Heart of Devon Community Energy	Energy	no	no	onshore wind
Hook Norton Low Carbon Limited	Sustainability	no	no	onshore wind/solar
Hope Valley Renewables	Energy	no	no	solar
Humberston Eco Conservation Centre (HECC)	Sustainability	no	yes	onshore wind
Kent Community Energy	Energy	yes	yes	various
Lockleaze Neighbourhood Trust	Sustainability and Regeneration	no	yes	various
Repowering London	Energy	no	no	energy efficiency
Shropshire and Telford Community Energy	Energy	yes	yes	electric vehicles

Organisation name	Organisation scope	New group?	New to community energy?	Type of technology/ project/ need
South Somerset Community Energy Society Ltd.	Energy	no	no	various
Stoke North Big Local Partnership (SNBL)	Sustainability and Regeneration	no	yes	various
Sustainable Calne	Sustainability	yes	yes	solar
Sustainable Overton	Sustainability	yes	yes	energy efficiency
The C.H.E.E.S.E. Project CIC (Cold Homes Energy Efficiency Survey Experts)	Energy	no	no	energy efficiency
Wight Community Access Ltd	Community transport	no	yes	community transport
Wight Community Energy	Energy	no	no	various
York Community Energy	Energy	no	no	energy efficiency
Zero Carbon Compton	Energy	yes	yes	various