



Sheffield Renewables



Location
Sheffield

Founded
2007

Legal structure
Community Benefit Society

Description of services
Its mission is ‘to harness local enthusiasm, knowledge, skills and investment to create an energetic and committed social enterprise, which develops, owns and operates renewable energy schemes’

Overview of the business

Sheffield Renewables was born out of Sheffield’s Climate Change Movement and a desire to ‘do something concrete’ about climate change issues. The organisation officially registered in 2008, and is run mainly by volunteers, a large number of whom are local students.

The business initially aimed to build hydro-electric schemes on the River Don and raised a total of £250k, predominantly through community shares. However, in tendering for the construction work it was realised that the cost of the work would make it unviable due to several local factors (e.g. the presence of an old sewer on the site, the need for a fish path). As a result, the organisation refocused on photo-voltaic (PV) solar generation: they currently manage three 50kW PV schemes – at Paces Campus, Swinton Fitzwilliam Primary School, Attercliffe Police Station – and one 26kW PV scheme at Lembas Wholefood Co-op. Income is derived from the Feed-in Tariffs for these schemes.

Sheffield Renewables ran two share issues, one in 2012/13 raising £210,000 from a target of £200,000, and a second in 2016 raising the targeted £70,000. The first share issue had a minimum investment level of £250 but allowed investment in instalments. The second issue had a minimum level of £100.

Participants saw the organisation as a community business:

‘community action for our energy future. A community of people (volunteers, investors and partners) who want to make things happen – we are all volunteers with no paid staff [currently].’

Why is community accountability important?

Participants suggested that community accountability manifests itself in the values/ethos of the organisation: ‘Because we have certain values – it shapes how we work – including using local produce/suppliers, low carbon approaches etc. It keeps us focused – and means there are things we can’t do.’



It makes us want to be more open and accountable... flexible, open and receptive to new ideas.'

A large part of Sheffield Renewables' work is its partnerships and relationships with other organisations. Community accountability and the values/ethos of the organisation are used as a tool for selecting the right partners for their work: *'We have to see them as a community organisation; Lembas [a wholefood wholesaler with solar PV installation] are a co-operative and have a shared ethos. We wouldn't say no to [an installation on] a business – if they benefited Sheffield and the environment.'*

What does accountability look like locally?

Here we use three categories to provide a snapshot of some of the mechanisms and methods that the business uses in community accountability. These categories are not hard and fast; there is some overlap between the areas outlined.

Structures

- AGM that enables people to ask questions, including challenging it which helps to *'develop our thinking and substantiates decisions'*.
- The involvement and dependence on a volunteer workforce and their role as directors of the organisation facilitates a robust understanding of the needs of different constituencies: *'Directors are all involved in different aspects [of the organisation's work] – the Board really do have different hats on. [Company Secretary] knows the issues that investors are raising, "i.e. what an investor might come back with". Because we're a community benefit society and have community shares, that principle guides us, nobody is ever closed down at a Board meeting, concerns are always listened to.'*

- Investors are represented and have the ability to observe Board meetings: *'the opportunity to see how the decisions are made, and that there is somebody on the Board representing the investors.'*
- Three board members step down each year and put themselves up to be re-elected – there have been new recruits to the Board to boost its capacity and there is training available to board members.

Relationships

As well as the relationships outlined above and a team of local volunteers running the organisation, Sheffield Renewables has extensive local networks that provide a further means of maintaining accountability: local, regional and national community energy groups; community groups; faith communities, etc.

Communications

Accountability focuses on regular and consistent communication using a variety of approaches – meetings, relationship-building, developing a local presence. It is possible to get involved with Sheffield Renewables as a supporter and receive their newsletter. People can also sign up as a potential investor through the Sheffield Renewables website.

Social media is significant for the organisation (keeping contact and accountability) as well as the organisation's newsletter to about 1000 supporters (sent out every two months). The website is also updated to reflect latest developments and news.