

COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING



Preston City Council

How Community and Anchor Partnerships are supporting a Low Carbon Economy in Preston

Advancing a Shared Economy in Preston (ASEP) is a programme jointly funded by Preston City Council and Power to Change. It aims to strengthen institutional capacity to support a more democratic and collaborative local economy in Preston. From the outset, the opportunity created by the transition to a low carbon economy for the development of the social economy has been a core theme. The Preston Cooperative Development Network (PCDN), a key ASEP delivery partner, has supported two community groups which are creating cooperative enterprises rooted in Preston's communities and focussed on the green transition.

One of these groups is Spaceplace, a well-respected charity which operates the Soundskills community centre in Brookfield, a large estate of private and social housing in one of the most deprived parts of Preston. Spaceplace identified local concern about youth unemployment and fuel poverty and in response has been working with a group of residents, a local building company and the PCDN to establish a new cooperative enterprise, Retrofit+. The cooperative aims to improve the energy efficiency of homes and other buildings on the estate and to create new employment and training opportunities for young people. The long-term aim is to grow a local 'retrofit workforce' to carry out contract work on Brookfield and across the wider Preston area.

Key to the project is the community centre itself. Soundskills is an informal space where people can develop their employability skills and self-confidence and is an ideal location for community and co-operative enterprise. In phase one of the project, Retrofit + will train three residents as part of a programme to retrofit the community centre itself transforming Soundskills into a hub to increase local awareness of retrofit and of its role in improving energy efficiency and reducing costs. Funding for the first phase of the project has been provided by the ASEP programme and a local crowdfunder as well as smaller grants. Later phases will focus on retrofitting other local community spaces, businesses, and local homes as

well as further training and education about the climate emergency and other environmental issues of concern to the local community.



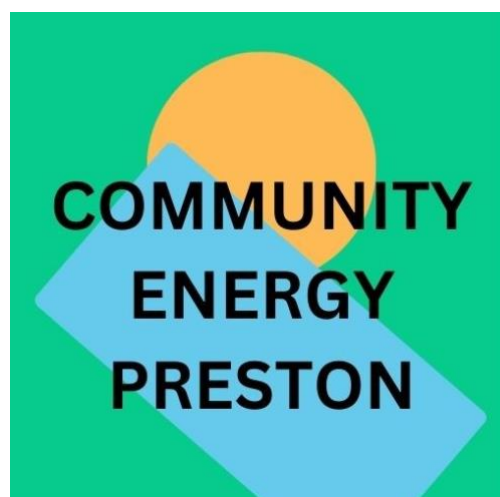
Retrofit works beginning at Soundskills April 2024

Retrofit + has a clear purpose and mission. It is a cooperative owned by its members who will benefit directly from the opportunities it provides for training and employment, as well as contribute to the wider green transition in Preston. It is rooted in the locality it serves and therefore understands and forms part of the network of relationships within the estate. It is anticipated that it will make an important contribution to improving the lives of residents in Brookfield.

The second project PCDN is supporting is to develop the community energy sector in Preston. Inspired by the success of other community energy groups across the UK, a working group of local authority officers, the PCDN, community activists and volunteers began meeting in 2021. The group aimed to use the mechanism of a community share offer to finance the roll out of solar energy generating capacity on rooftops across the city. Its members brought together a wide range of skills and experience, as well as the confidence to embark on an ambitious and complex project.

With support and advice from the PCDN, the group registered formally as Community Energy Preston (CEP) Ltd, a Community Benefit Society (CBS), which is a form of cooperative, in 2023. As a CBS, CEP can issue community shares to finance the installation of solar panels. Discussions are well advanced with three anchor organisations in Preston (anchor organisations are those which have an important local presence) which wish to install solar energy on available rooftops but cannot access the capital to do so on their own account. The issue of community shares will allow CEP to finance the installation and share the benefit of the cheaper energy generated with the anchor organisations hosting the panels on their rooftops and with the wider community through the operation of a community fund. Many community energy projects across the UK have used the community fund to prioritise local projects to address fuel poverty.

Preston's ASEP programme is funding a project coordinator to support CEP's directors and specialist technical advice from the PCDN on cooperative governance and on issuing a community share offer. A 'Powering Our Communities' grant from Electricity Northwest Ltd is funding detailed feasibility studies of the proposed sites for solar installations. Later in 2024 CEP expects to issue a community share offer to raise over £1 million for the installation of the panels at the sites.



CEP Ltd is committed to becoming a self-financing and non-profit distributing cooperative company. The focus of its activity is to engage local people in the development, operation and ownership of renewable energy in Preston and to commit any surplus income to local community projects to address fuel poverty.

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