

Submission to the Electricity Authority: Green Paper on a Decentralised Electricity System

From: Community Energy Whāingaroa (CEWh)

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Introduction

Community Energy Whāingaroa (CEWh) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion on the future of Aotearoa New Zealand's electricity system. We are a community-led energy initiative based in Whāingaroa (Raglan) focused on reducing energy hardship and ensuring every household has access to warm, dry, energy-efficient homes, while building pathways toward community-owned renewable generation.

This submission draws on our experience:

- Establishing a locally governed energy initiative
- Delivering healthy home assessments and minor retrofits
- Supporting community members in energy hardship
- Exploring a vision for community-owned solar infrastructure with equitable reinvestment into community wellbeing

Question 1: Do you agree with the description of decentralisation?

Yes. The paper provides a strong and inclusive foundation for defining decentralisation in the electricity sector. We particularly support the emphasis on:

- Local generation and storage (DERs)
- Democratised planning and ownership
- Digitalisation
- Community trust and engagement

Our addition: A clear fifth pillar should be **regulatory and financial enablement** of community and iwi-led DERs. Many initiatives stall not because of technical barriers, but because of inflexible regulatory structures or lack of upfront capital. Decentralisation will only thrive if community energy actors can be active participants in the system, not passive beneficiaries.

Question 2: Do you agree with the articulation of the potential outcomes and benefits from decentralisation for consumers?

Yes. The benefits are well articulated. From our experience, we highlight:

- **Affordability and Equity:** Our Healthy Homes assessments consistently show those most affected by poor housing and energy costs are least likely to benefit from DERs. Without regulatory and funding models designed for inclusion, decentralisation could deepen inequities.
- **Energy Literacy:** We have seen how energy education during home visits builds trust and leads to behavioural change and empowerment.
- **Community Resilience:** Our vision for a solar farm includes a resilience plan for backup power with a battery.

Recommendation: Actively fund and integrate decentralised resilience hubs on marae, community centres, and schools in rural or hazard-prone areas.

Question 3: Do you agree with the challenges outlined? What else would you add?

Yes. All of the challenges identified resonate with our experience. We would add:

1. Legal and Financial Barriers to Local Ownership

Our work exploring a community-owned solar farm has revealed roadblocks around land access, shared ownership models, and a lack of financial products tailored to community-scale energy.

2. Disjointed Data and Tools

Community energy groups struggle to access the data needed to design and fund DER projects. There is no national toolkit or data map to support local stocktakes or energy planning.

3. Capacity at the Frontlines

Community energy navigators are essential to engaging households in energy resilience work. These roles are often voluntary or piecemeal funded.

4. Relationship with Electricity Distribution Businesses (EDBs)

There is a critical need for EDBs to be more open to collaboration with local energy groups, especially:

- Supporting community groups to connect to the grid
- Partnering on optimal battery placement for community resilience
- Reducing costs and complexity for community-owned solar to connect
- Simplifying peer-to-peer arrangements so consumers can easily sign up

Recommendation: Establish a national fund and shared tools for community energy development, similar to the Community Housing Regulatory Authority model, and introduce regulatory guidance requiring EDBs to engage meaningfully with community energy proposals.

Question 4: Do you agree with the articulated opportunity statement for a decentralised electricity system?

Yes, and we support its ambition. It speaks directly to our community's goals:

- To build a **community-owned solar farm** that provides local returns
- To support an **equitable and inclusive retrofit programme** to address energy hardship
- To enable **local decision-making**, with iwi, hapū, and community groups at the table

Suggestion: This vision should include specific mention of community ownership as a mechanism to return wealth and resilience to regions.

Question 5: What other feedback would you like to provide?

a) What should decentralisation look like?

- A diverse network of local energy hubs (urban and rural)
- Communities that co-own or co-govern local generation, batteries, and flexible load
- Real-time access to energy data and trading platforms
- Local energy integrated into regional spatial and climate adaptation plans

b) How will this benefit consumers?

- Lower energy bills and improved health through better housing
- More reliable local energy in adverse events
- Economic returns to local communities through ownership and training and skills development in youth.

c) What is needed to unlock this?

- A regulatory framework that supports **community-scale DERs**, not just household or utility-scale
- Capacity building in communities (energy navigators, training, tools)
- Tiered incentives that give priority to households in hardship and underserved areas
- EDB accountability to engage with community DER proposals and co-design integration options

Question 6: Are there other case studies we could learn from?

Community Energy Whāingaroa is a live example of a grassroots energy project bridging health, equity, and decarbonisation. In just two years:

- Developed an energy wellbeing program, trained 7 local people in Home Performance and home energy education to deliver the program to the community.
- Installed low-cost retrofits (LEDs, draught stoppers, insulation)
- Supported renters and homeowners with advice, referrals, and subsidy access
- Secured an options for lease on land adjacent to local substation
- Worked with local solar specialist on a viable concept for a 2MW solar farm
- Engaged renewable energy specialist for financial modelling to determine the projects viability.

We encourage the Authority to follow and support similar models from other regions such as:

- **Te Arawa Energy (Rotorua):** Māori-led community resilience energy vision
- **Blueskin Resilient Communities Trust (Otago):** Wind and solar co-op development

Final Comment: A Vision for CEWh and Aotearoa

At CEWh, our long-term vision is a future where:

- Every home in Whāingaroa is warm, dry, and energy efficient
- Whānau are not in energy hardship
- Energy generation is owned by and for the benefit of the community

This green paper is a critical step. We urge the Electricity Authority to create regulatory settings that unlock these opportunities — not just for the energy sector, but for the communities and people energy should serve.

Ngā mihi nui,
Community Energy Whāingaroa