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# Power grids: community energy and comics co-creation

Dominic Davies*, Kremena Dimitrova and Reed Puc

## ABSTRACT

This online exhibition of photographs and artworks provides documentation of 'Power Grids: Reimagining Energy Infrastructure in Comics' (2024–2026). The project is funded by the BA/Leverhulme Small Research grant scheme and the images included here were exhibited at the British Academy's Summer Showcase in June 2025. The project brings together two discrete yet growing social movements: community energy and comics-based research. It uses comics co-creation workshops to conduct research into the way communities across England are organising to produce sustainable energy and in that way to lower fuel costs, catalyse the green transition and combat the climate crisis, and build place-making cultures of empowerment and belonging.

**Keywords** comics-based research, comics co-creation, climate crisis, community energy, the green transition

## Introduction

This online exhibition of photographs and artworks provides documentation of 'Power Grids: Reimagining Energy Infrastructure in Comics' (2024–2026). This research project is funded by the BA/Leverhulme Small Research grant scheme and the images included here were exhibited at the British Academy's Summer Showcase at 10–11 Carlton House in June 2025. The project brings together two discrete yet growing social movements: community energy and comics-based research. It uses comics co-creation workshops to conduct research into the way communities across England are organising to produce sustainable energy and in that way to lower fuel costs, catalyse the green transition, and build place-making cultures of empowerment and belonging.

In this short introduction to the exhibition, we will provide some basic information about community energy and explain why we chose to use comics co-creation as a method of research into this quickly expanding sector. We will also briefly explain the activities documented in the exhibition's images. The exhibition is aimed at readers with interests in community activism, sustainable energy production, and the development of innovative research methods to build stories and social movements around the pressing infrastructure demands of the 21st century.

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* Corresponding author. E-mail: dominic.davies@city.ac.uk

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## Community energy

Rapidly building sustainable infrastructure for the provision of green energy will play a pivotal role in reaching Net Zero and limiting the impact of the climate crisis both in the UK and globally. Community energy projects present an efficient and cost-effective way to roll out this infrastructure and move the UK towards a green transition. Comprised of localised energy infrastructures that range from rooftop solar and onshore wind power to rural heat networks and retrofitted buildings, these projects have both immediate and long-term economic, social, and political benefits for the communities that run them (Community Energy England 2025).

To begin, by producing clean energy at a time of rising fuel prices, community energy can provide collective security and protect vulnerable users from the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. It can also involve community members in the construction, repair, and maintenance of energy infrastructures, spreading practical skills that empower people who might otherwise feel alienated from infrastructure as a specialist service that is 'done to them' by top-down organisations (Cose 2018). There are many obstacles to community energy, from growing opposition to Net Zero policies in right-wing politics, to aesthetic objections to green infrastructure locally, to on-the-ground conflicts between infrastructure development and biodiversity loss (Davies 2023). Nonetheless, when broadly understood, the empowerment of communities to take control of their energy production creates space where these problems can at least be tackled out in the open, and in ways that feel immediately relevant to people's lived experience. In many cases, community energy has the potential to rectify a democratic deficit by bringing people together through collaborative action and increasing their involvement in local decision-making processes (Kalkbrenner & Roosen 2016; Pohlmann & Colell 2020).

## Comics co-creation

What does this have to do with comics and graphic narratives? As many artists and scholars have shown, comics are a creative, accessible, and 'infrastructural' medium, well suited to mapping layered cultural geographies and communicating complex spatial systems in legible terms (Dittmer 2010; Peterle 2021). This is because comics and graphic narratives (we use the two terms interchangeably here) are built from what Davies has called an 'infrastructural form' that includes frames, panels, gutters, and grids, combining image and text in a way that is planned out spatially on the page (Davies 2019). This very particular 'narrative infrastructure' has made comics especially adept at representing and responding to forms of infrastructural violence, including ecologically devastating practices in the world's extraction zones (Davies 2024). As importantly, it has allowed comics artists to reimagine more socially and spatially just forms of infrastructure—including energy infrastructure—in cities ranging from New Orleans and Beirut to Delhi and Cape Town and beyond (Davies 2019).

Notably, this practice of using graphic narrative and other arts-based methods to reimagine alternatives to failing infrastructures often begins in the Global South and works its way northwards, where it has recently come to be known as 'comics-based research' (Moretti 2023). Importantly, while comics are often intuitively understood as a way to communicate the results of academic research, this emerging practice actively uses comics as a core part of its research method. Indeed, 'research-based comics' or 'research comics' are gaining traction across the humanities and social sciences precisely because they allow researchers to tell stories *with* people, rather than about them (Wysocki 2021). Building on this work, this project deploys emerging comics research and co-creation methodologies to empower practitioners to give artistic expression to their own lived experiences and personal understandings of community energy, as well as the social and political ecology through which it operates.

Comics-based research is rooted in the fact that comics creation lends itself to collaborative co-production between artists, writers, journalists, community members, and other stakeholders (Theodossopoulos 2022). The multi-modal form of graphic narrative is particularly adept at building stories around diverse voices and perspectives, self-reflexively acknowledging different standpoints and their contexts, and presenting both concordant and conflicting views together in juxtaposition on the page (Sousanis 2015). Comics build intergenerational and multifaceted stories, and they communicate ideas through intuitive and interactive sequences of images and icons. They do not necessitate specialist expertise in semiotics, drawing, design, or other creative practices, and they remain widely accessible to those who may lack confidence in textual or visual communication skills. Many of the artists Davies has engaged in his research have developed their work around infrastructure through comics co-creation workshops, deliberately 'drawing' communities together through collaborative artistic practices that are often closely associated with social movements and other activist contexts (Davies 2019, see also Moretti & Della Puppa 2025).

## Power grids

The title of this project, 'Power Grids', ties together these different concerns. First, it puns on the synergy between content and form, as the project documents the grids of contemporary energy infrastructures in the gridded form of graphic narrative. Second, contained inside this parallel is another double-meaning: while the 'power' of 'Power Grids' quite obviously refers to the wind and solar energy that is harnessed by community energy projects, it further alerts us to the forms of social power that emerge when communities organise to take control of their infrastructure (Colell 2019). It is very much our intention to continue developing these comics co-creation workshops into a collective space that can be used to document—and also potentially to inspire—similar forms of social power moving forward.

This exhibition documents two comics co-creation workshops held with community energy practitioners in May 2025. These practitioners came from a

range of backgrounds, from energy governance experts and social entrepreneurs to climate activists and community volunteers. The first workshop was hosted at City St George's, University of London (Figure 1), the second at Hulme Garden Centre in Manchester (Figure 2). Practitioners attended from across England, from the Lake District through to Manchester and Sheffield, and from London through to Sussex and Devon. The images in the exhibition fall into three sections: the first documents the London workshop; the second documents the Manchester workshop; and the third presents a selection of individual and collaborative comics that were made during the course of these activities.

The project remains unfinished. Davies continues to work with his colleagues and collaborators, the visual illustrator Kremena Dimitrova and comics researcher Reed Puc, who have been instrumental in the delivery of these workshops. We continue to work with the comics made during these sessions and to develop them through co-production practices into longer graphic narratives that explore community energy in more depth and coherence. Nonetheless, there is a flavour of the progress and potential of the project in the images exhibited here. As they suggest, while the finished comics have rich uses as research data and communication materials that are still under development, the process of co-creation as a research method is itself of significant social value for participants and the communities they represent.

**Figure 1.** Community energy practitioners take a break from drawing to discuss their experiences in the sector.


**Figure 2.** Participants hear about the first community energy and comics co-creation workshop in London and learn more about the motivations behind the research project.

**Figure 3.** The first community energy and comics co-creation workshop gets underway at City St George's, University of London.

**Figure 4.** Community energy practitioners get to work making comics.

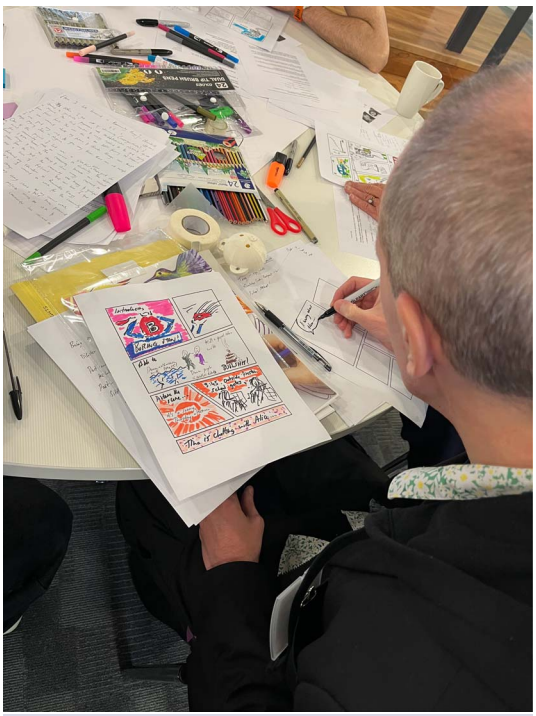

**Figure 5.** A workshop participant develops their comic about obstacles to community energy.

**Figure 6.** Another workshop participant uses a comics template to build their story of the benefits of community energy.

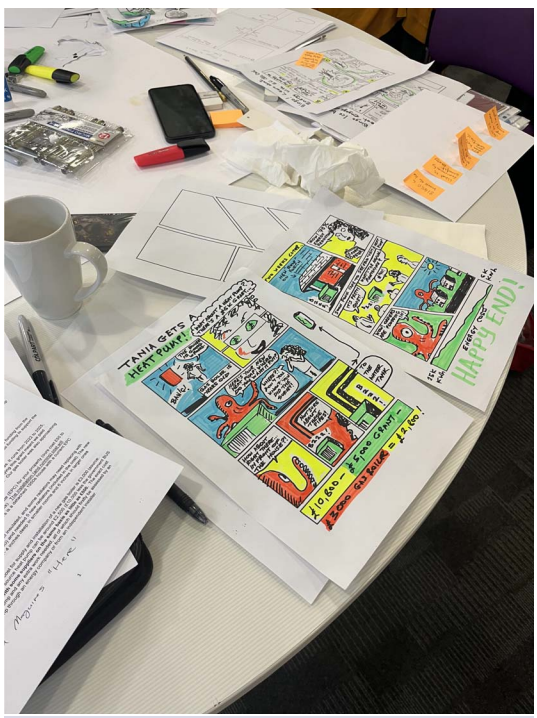


**Figure 7.** A finished comic describes the process of installing a heat pump.

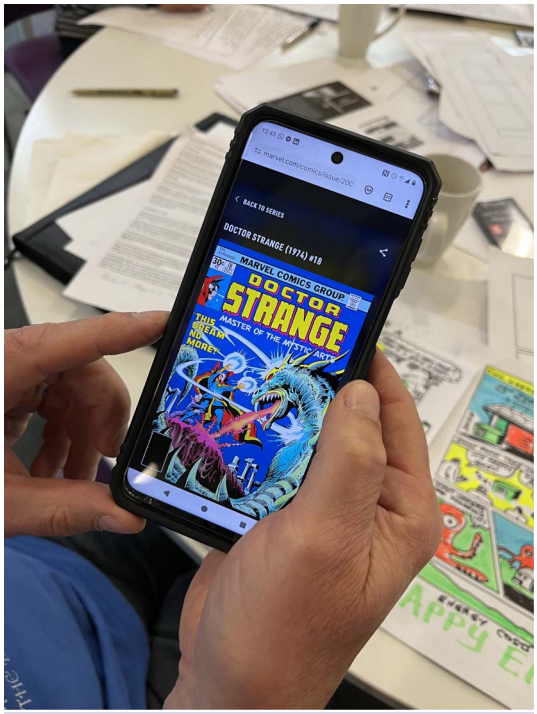


**Figure 8.** A workshop participant uses their smartphone to show the Doctor Strange cover that provided inspiration for the use of colour in their comic.

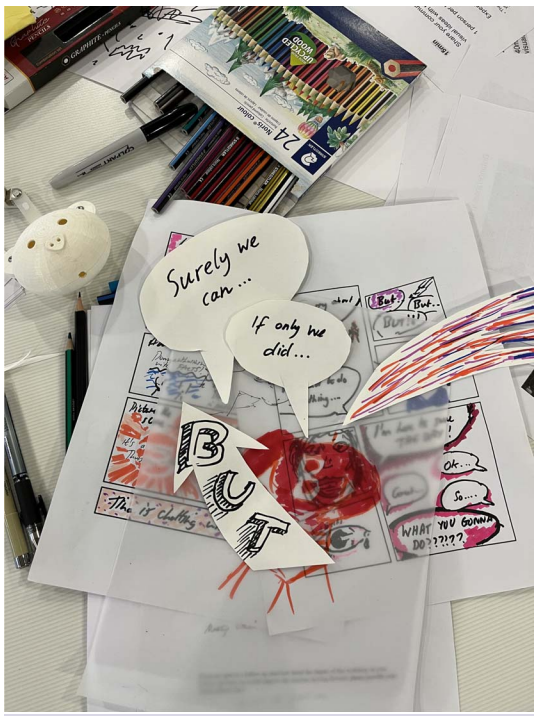


**Figure 9.** Workshops participants experiment with tracing paper, speech bubbles, and cut-out arrows to identify the obstacles to community energy.


**Figure 10.** Workshop participants use cut-out panels, tracing paper, and larger sheets of sugar paper to map-out the economics of community share offers.

**Figure 11.** Some participants make three-dimensional comics using glue and sticky notes to bring their stories of community energy to life.


**Figure 12.** Other participants use a mix of abstract drawings and mind maps to visualise the different stakeholders in community energy projects.

**Figure 13.** Workshop participants use finished comics as talking points to discuss different aspects of community energy.

**Figure 14.** Some participants present other educational tools they have developed alongside comics, including models of three-dimensional turbines powering energy in homes.

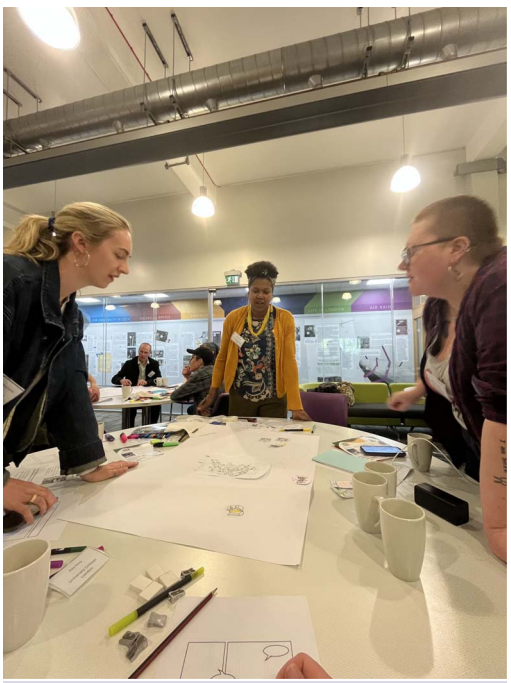

**Figure 15.** Three workshop participants begin planning a collaborative comic that will map the community energy sector in its entirety.

**Figure 16.** Different participants contribute to the development of the community energy map, drawing in details, connections, and stakeholders.

**Figure 17.** Four workshop participants discuss the collaboratively produced comic, clarifying details and mapping connections in the sector.

**Figure 18.** The second community energy and comics co-creation workshop gets underway at Hulme Garden Centre in Manchester.

**Figure 19.** Participants begin by sharing their experiences of community energy with the rest of the group.

**Figure 20.** Workshop participants begin planning their comics, developing individual stories into sequential narratives that they can insert into grid templates.

**Figure 21.** Participants spread out through Hulme Garden Centre and get to work on their individual comics artworks.

**Figure 22.** Workshop participants find shelter from the very hot greenhouse in a wooden classroom, where they settle down to develop their comics about community energy.

**Figure 23.** Two workshop participants work intently on their stories about their experiences of community energy.

**Figure 24.** One participant draws out a six-panel grid for their comics story, while another plans a larger map of the community energy sector.

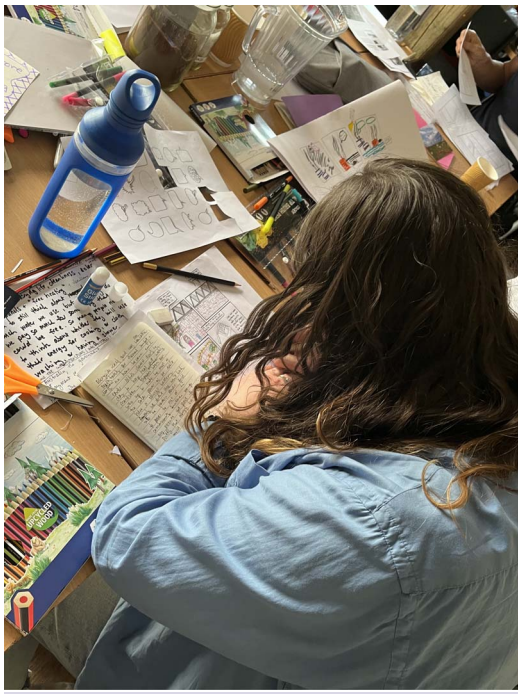

**Figure 25.** Participants develop their comics from extensive notes that they have used to identify an interesting story with a lesson about community energy.

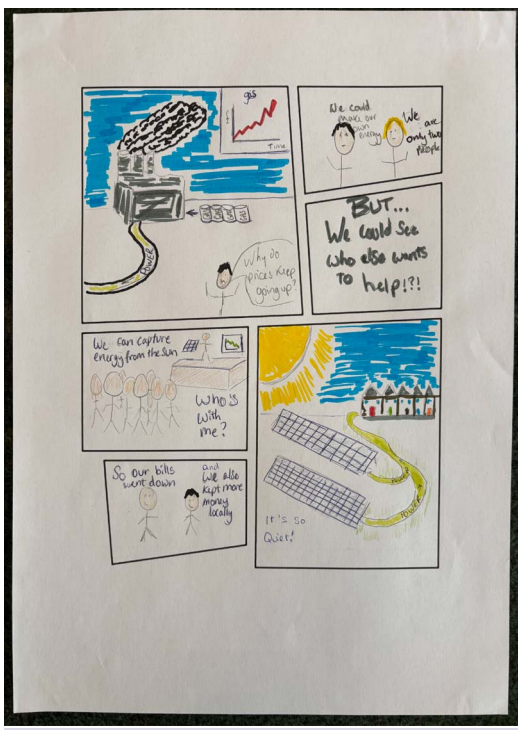


**Figure 26.** One comic highlights community energy as a way to combat rising costs of fossil fuels and alleviate noise pollution.


**Figure 27.** Another comic, titled 'Tanya Gets a Heat Pump!', explains the process of installing heat pumps, including the grants that are available to support the process and the way simple aesthetic modifications to a house can conceal the equipment.


**Figure 28.** This comic identifies the super villain of the community energy sector: 'Boring Man!' The pessimistic character who obstructs community solutions with negative comments.

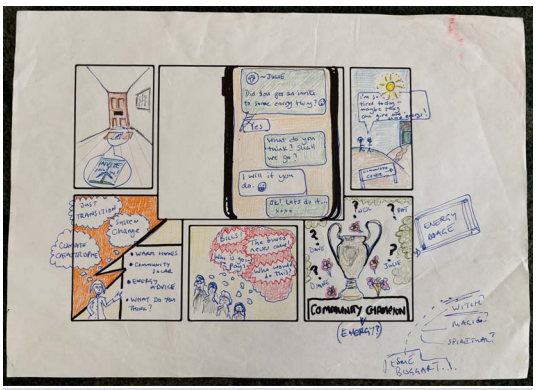


**Figure 29.** A comic describes the pathway to action for a community member who receives some information about community energy through their letterbox, are engaged through social media, and eventually attend a meeting in person. Soon they realise the benefits and become a community energy champion.


**Figure 30.** This brilliant comic describes the UK's lack of solar panels on basic housing units, drawing on the author's experience in Australia—where solar is widespread—to imagine a future Britain where the state supports communities to install and take ownership of this green energy infrastructure.


**Figure 31.** This multi-directional bubble maps shows the different forces driving the community energy sector forwards, identifying its benefits but also some of the obstacles to its development.


**Figure 32.** A dynamic, three-dimensional comic maps the different historical uses in the south of England. Once used by pilots practising parachuting during WWII, then later as a site of a music festival and farmland to grow crops, a farmer now plans to erect wind turbines on the land—but is met with a negative response from surrounding residents.


**Figure 33.** This almost 'silent' comic (without text) maps the development of Brent Pure Energy, a community energy organisation that brought people together to take control of their energy by erecting solar panels and in that way combat the climate crisis.

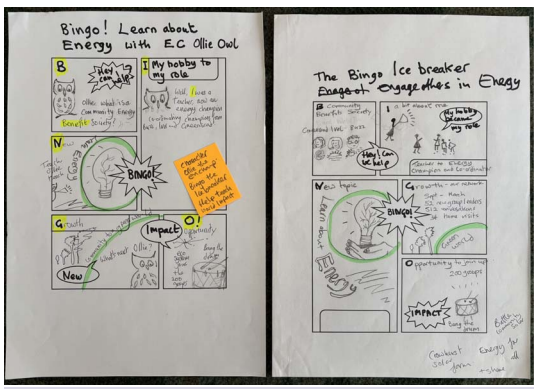


**Figure 34.** A comic made by a retired teacher introduces 'Ollie Owl' as a character who can help to educate students about the benefits of community energy using BINGO (Benefits, I, New, Growth, Impact, Opportunity) as an acronym.

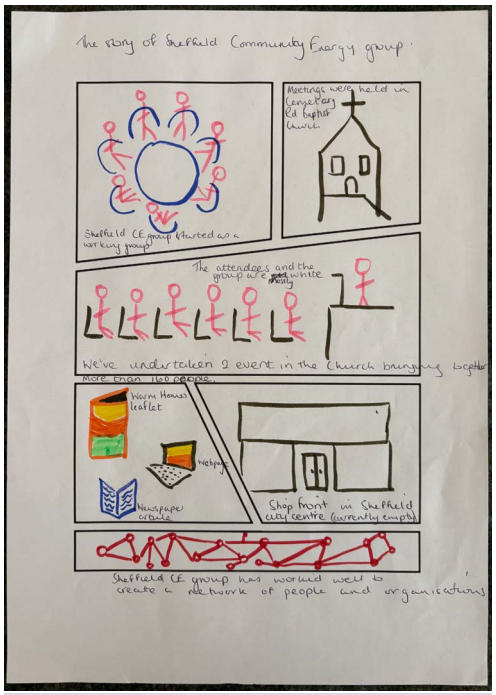


**Figure 35.** Proving that you can tell an engaging story about community energy using only stick figures, this comic describes the formation and growth of Sheffield Community Energy Group.

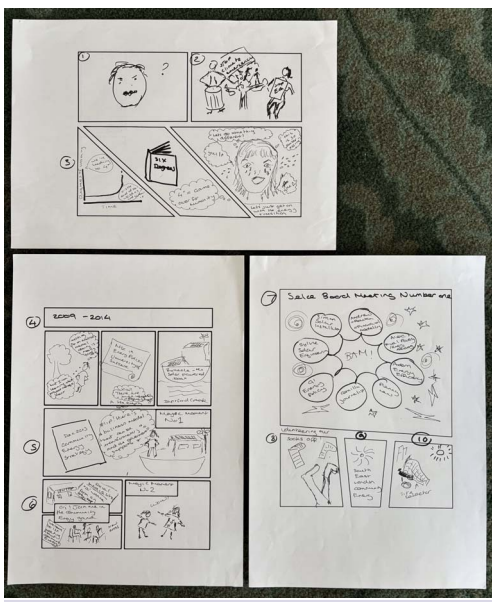

**Figure 36.** This comic traces the roots of community energy back to climate activism against global warming in the early 2000s and follows this through to the many meetings and hours of volunteering work that built the South East London Community Energy organisation.

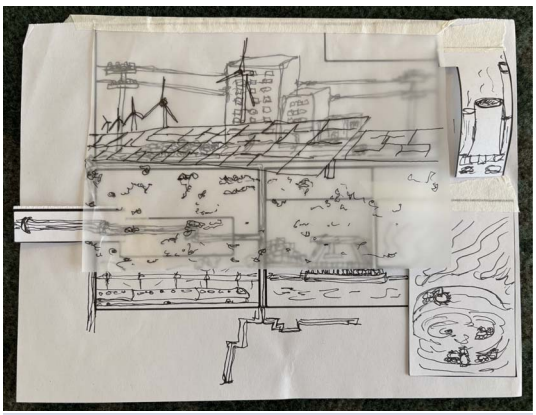

**Figure 37.** This silent, non-sequential comic uses tracing paper to show how green forms of energy like wind turbines and solar panels overlay dirtier forms of energy powered by fossil fuels, which continue to persist underneath the achievements of community energy.


**Figure 38.** A collaboratively produced comic profiles the so-called 'bad guys' who stand in the way of community energy, including the council environment officer, the fossil fuel lobby, and of course, Queen Nim-Bee (Not In My Back Yard).


**Figure 39.** This collaboratively produced, illustrated mind map shows how different interests and pressure groups shape the ecology of the community energy sector. It puts renewable energy generation at the centre of huge global issues, from modern slavery and environmental damage to community cooperation and negative media coverage.


**Figure 40.** A three-dimensional map shows how community energy links basic infrastructure to a myriad of social forces, from law and policymaking to community share offers to political advocacy and involvement in the democratic process.

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## About the authors

**Dr Dominic Davies** is a Reader in English at City St George's, University of London. He holds a DPhil and BA Postdoctoral Fellowship from the University of Oxford. His research explores the cultural politics of infrastructure and engages arts-based solutions to infrastructure problems. He convenes the Thinking Through Infrastructure Network (TTiN) and he is the author of *Urban Comics* (Routledge 2019) and *The Broken Promise of Infrastructure* (Lawrence Wishart 2023), among other books. More information about his research is available at www.drdomdavies.com.

**Dr Kremena Dimitrova** is a London based socially engaged and interdisciplinary illustrator, co-creator, and researcher. She specialises in visual storytelling in the cultural, heritage, education, and community sectors with experience of more than ten years. Kremena holds a practice-based PhD in visualising history from the University of Portsmouth and currently works as a part-time arts-based postdoctoral researcher at Oxford Brookes University. More information about her work is available at www.kremenadimitrova.com. E-mail: kremena.dimitrova@port.ac.uk

**Dr Reed Puc** is Curator, Americas Collections at The British Library. Their doctoral research, 'Spider-Sensibilities: Policing, Race, and Urban Spatial Imaginaries in Spider-Man Narratives', is an abolitionist examination of urban superhero comics and their impacts on our relationships with justice, policing, and safety. His work was awarded the Carceral Geography Working Group's 2023 Postgraduate Dissertation Prize. E-mail: Reed.Puc@citystgeorges.ac.uk