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BRE National Solar Centre

Community engagement good practice guidance for solar farms

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Contents

1 Context

This document outlines good practice and principles for community engagement over the lifecycle of a UK solar farm project. It is aimed primarily at commercial developers although it may also be useful for individuals and community groups.

The former coalition Government published the UK's first Community Energy Strategy[1] in 2014, with an update in March 2015[2] and the current Government remains committed to the community energy agenda. The Government has made clear its desire to see communities consulted properly with respect to energy developments, and has actively promoted the importance of positive relationships with communities via shared ownership. The Government recognises that solar now plays an important role in the UK's energy mix, and that commercial organisations need to find a way to help communities and planning authorities embrace the opportunities presented by this technology.

This guide is not about Community Energy, nor the shared ownership agenda; nor does it recommend any particular level of community benefit payment. The focus is solely on *community engagement*. Having said that, the process of engagement may result in a collaborative approach between community and commercial developer[3]. Many communities in the UK are now taking a more pro-active approach to meeting their own energy needs and this is to be welcomed.

Positive community engagement is complementary to the planning process, but is nevertheless also a distinct set of activities in its own right. It is the process of entering into a genuine dialogue, not a box ticking exercise. Developers should recognise that if there are genuine, evidence-based concerns regarding the impacts of a site or project then they should consider not going ahead with that particular site as proposed.

Community engagement should take place before, during and long after the formal planning process is complete. It is about the ongoing relationship with the community and its purpose goes beyond merely gaining planning consent. Above all it is about being a good neighbour.

The general principles of good community engagement are common to many developments; i.e. timeliness, transparency, a constructive approach and being inclusive, fair and evidence-based[4] Engagement by any party, at any stage, does not imply support for the development, or that approval by the local planning authority is more likely to be achieved. Other principles include keeping promises, clear communications, maintaining contact with all those affected by implementation, having a proper means of dialogue, monitoring impacts and measuring stakeholders' perceptions[5].

This document complements other good practice guidelines issued by the BRE National Solar Centre[6] The guidance presented here has been developed with, and endorsed by, a number of leading public consultation specialists, community representatives and UK solar companies.

1 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-energy-strategy

2 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-energy-strategy-update

3 E.g.initiating or developing community-owned projects, or taking an ownership stake in a commercial project developer's project.

4 These principles were set out in the guidance produced by RegenSW for Department of Energy and Climate Change (2014) *Community Engagement for Onshore Wind Developments: Best Practice Guidance for England.*

5 These are the Consultation Institute's "Implementation Engagement Standards" http://www.consultationinstitute.org/resources/Implementation-Engagement-Standards/

6 Planning guidance for the development of large scale ground mounted solar PV systems, BRE National Solar Centre, October 2013 Agricultural Good Practice Guidance for Solar Farms, BRE National Solar Centre, July 2014 Biodiversity Guidance for Solar Developments, BRE National Solar Centre, April 2014.

2 Introduction

Field-scale arrays of ground-mounted PV modules, or "solar farms", are a relatively recent development, seen in Britain only since 2011. The industry is aware of the need for good practice, and the Solar Trade Association has produced a list of "10 Commitments" which it encourages its members to abide by[7].

The solar industry has expanded rapidly, and while good practice is now commonplace, it is not universal.

3 Why undertake community engagement?

Whilst there is no specific national legislation requiring solar developers to undertake pre-application community engagement (in contrast to onshore wind), national and devolved planning guidance strongly encourages all developers to consult with local communities. Over and above this, pre-application consultation can be required by local authorities within their own planning policies.

Community engagement should also be high on the list of solar developers for the following reasons:

- maintaining a positive reputation for the industry
- reducing opposition
- as an opportunity to challenge negative perceptions
- addressing concerns (unwarranted concerns can often be allayed by the process of talking them through)
- identifying issues developers may have missed
- tapping into local knowledge – i.e. types of plants that grow best; busiest roads to avoid for construction traffic etc.
- building a supporter base
- meeting the expectations of local authorities and councillors (failure to take the time to engage with the local community will reflect badly on a developer)
- establishing and maintaining relationships with the community who will be the solar farms' neighbours for the next 25+ years
- where people are involved and well-informed it may hasten the decision-making process.

7 http://www.solar-trade.org.uk/sta-solar-farms-10-commitments/

4 Who to engage with? What is "the community"?

The question of who to engage with will have different answers depending on the nature and scale of the proposal, the characteristics of the site, the locality, and the makeup of the local community. A community typically comprises a "neighbourhood" – a geographical catchment area, within which people will have some kind of relationship to a development. For each proposal, developers should identify how a project might relate to, and potentially impact, the community.

Key things to consider include:

- the closest neighbours and other residents who may be impacted by the proposal
- the nearest settlements, such as hamlets, villages or towns
- the key local leaders and representatives: local MP, local parish and district councillors, community leaders, project initiators
- schools and community groups
- residents associations and important local charities
- community energy groups[8] transition town or environmental organisations
- any other relevant bodies or NGOs, particularly those that the Local Planning Authority will consult
- whether there have been plans for any other solar or renewable energy developments locally, and the outcome.

Community stakeholders generally fall into one of the following categories:

1. **Supporters**: those that are generally happy with a development
2. **Potential beneficiaries**: those who want to benefit in some way once a development is operational
3. **Neutral**: those who are indifferent, unaware, unaffected or genuinely undecided
4. **Opponents**: those not in favour, and who may continue to dislike, or acquire a dislike, a project once it is operational.

Planning authorities will want to listen to all viewpoints and developers should have strategies to engage with key supporters, beneficiaries and opponents as early as possible, while also seeking to engage those who are undecided.

If possible, identify local advocates – people willing to stand up and support a project without prompting, e.g. landowners or general supporters of solar energy from the local area. Developers may want to prioritise those with the greatest influence e.g. those respected and sought by local people for leadership, representation or mediation or most active on social media.

5 When and how to engage with the community

There are mainly three key stages when engagement is likely to be beneficial:

1. **Project development**: including pre-application engagement in order to refine proposals intended to be submitted to planning, and engagement post-submission of the planning application. (Site selection is likely to have taken place before community engagement begins.)
2. **Construction**: including engagement prior to and throughout the construction period
3. **Ongoing operation**: maintaining an ongoing relationship during the operational life of the solar farm

6 Project development

If a site is deemed suitable, the development phase begins; developers will refine plans for the proposed solar farm, and gather the rights and permissions needed (i.e. planning permission, an offer to connect to the grid and a lease with a landowner). The Local Planning Authority is required to undertake a 4 week consultation period after receiving a planning application, inviting comments from statutory consultees, the community, and other stakeholders. Developers can refer to the local authority's "Statement of Community Involvement[9]" (SCI) which sets out how it will undertake consultation when determining planning applications.

Development is the most important phase for building relationships with the community. It can set the tone for the rest of the project and it is important that a developer is well-prepared and has decided:

- who in the organisation will be responsible for building and maintaining relationships within the local community
- the best approach for the community involved –plans for community events and tools for engagement (listed below).

This information, along with suggestions below, could be set out in an engagement plan (see text box on reporting). Try to provide opportunities for engagement for people with varying abilities, some of whom may be difficult to reach. A Q&A or key facts document could be useful, focusing on key messages including a project's needs case, issues and benefits. This should be kept updated, and be relevant throughout the life of a project.

Some solar developers have significant resources in-house (including, for example planning consultants or ecologists); others may outsource much of their consultation and community engagement processes. Solar projects will also differ, and may require different levels of engagement. Whichever route is taken, it is in the best interests of both developers and host communities that engagement is done properly.

8 Community Energy England may be able to help identify these in the context of its guidance on Shared Ownership. For more guidance on this see http://www.sco-res.uk/

9 In Wales this is the 'Community Involvement Scheme' http://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/6313/Guidlelines-on- effective-community-involvement.pdf

Tools for Engagement

Early Engagement with Parish/Community Councils

Early engagement with key community groups can have great benefits. Most small, rural communities will have an active parish council (or in Scotland and Wales a community council) and these are important when trying to get messages across. There may also be other important groups that need to be involved in the process.

Well-briefed stakeholders are better prepared should they be asked questions by local residents. The briefing process may inform developers of unforeseen issues and is also a chance, should developers choose to do so, to have early discussions on what might comprise any community benefit package. Record any influence these stakeholders have over site selection, mitigation processes or project design. This information can be extremely beneficial supporting material in a planning application.

Project Phone Line/Email

Enable people to make easy contact. This will help ensure that any issues are quickly handled by the right person and kept in-house. To maximise lessons learnt and for reporting reasons, have a working document for tracking issues and managing responses. The communications log and testimonials are useful inclusions in the consultation report (see Box 1: Reporting).

Drop-In Event

The most widely-used and comprehensive method of informing communities about proposed projects are public information drop-in events or exhibitions. These should provide an informal and non-confrontational environment for sharing views and a platform for a genuine two-way dialogue. As well as conveying information, it is equally important is that developers use these events to listen. Local people will often have a great deal of knowledge about the area and this can be very useful to gather. It is best to host one or two information events before submitting a planning application.

Choose times that are most convenient for local residents; it may be that the same meeting is held twice to ensure as many people as possible have an opportunity to attend. Try to use an accessible venue, and make sure that the information provided is as easy to understand as possible, even when covering technical subjects. If requested, provide information in different formats, e.g. large print.

It is best to issue invitations widely, although getting sufficient attendance can be challenging. If the planning authority and/or local key stakeholders are willing, liaise with them on who to invite. Publicise events well in advance; e.g. via local radio, social media, newspapers, notice boards and letter drops. If helpful, send a reminder invitation nearer the time. Consider inviting the key local stakeholders and decision makers (e.g. local parish councillors, ward councillors or planning committee members) to a private viewing and/or site visit beforehand. They will be better able to respond to enquiries if they understand the project.

An information pack prepared in advance and posted with the invitation can be a useful tool. Suggestions for presenting information include:

- project information boards – covering the project, environment, visual effects, community engagement, technical information
- Q&A sheets
- project fact sheets
- TV/computer to show videos about solar
- other BRE guidance documents (i.e. biodiversity, agricultural good practice)

It is a good idea to have members of the public exhibition team wearing name tags, comment or feedback sheets and a debrief session after the event to ensure all the verbal feedback received during the event is captured.

Box 1: Reporting

Pre-consultation – the "engagement plan"

A Statement of Community Consultation (SCC) is required by developers of Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NISPS). This is a report setting out how NSIPs will consult the local community about its proposals. Solar developers, when they report on how they will consult a community, sometimes refer to that report as a SCC. In this guidance it is referred to as the "engagement plan" to distinguish it from the statutory requirement.

Post consultation – the "consultation report"

It is advisable for developers to submit a report on how the engagement plan (outlined above) was implemented, alongside the planning application. This document will outline the methodology applied and how impacts identified by the local community have been addressed Again, various terms can be used for this, including "statement of community involvement" but herein is referred to as the "consultation report". This distinguishes it from the *Statement of Community Involvement produced by a Local Authority*. LA's have a statutory requirement to report how the public will be involved in the preparation of local development plans.

Figure 1 A public exhibition. Photo courtesy of Solstice Renewables

Figure 2 Exhibition boards. Photo courtesy of Big60Million

Additional Tools

Some other common tools for engagement include:

- a project website
- social media presence, e.g. Facebook
- a comments and feedback mechanism
- a project information pack
- a community newsletter
- local press releases

Further ideas for consideration:

- site visits to operational solar farms
- follow-up meetings for those that have expressed concerns
- exploring the potential to collaborate further with local community groups, businesses or prospective local contractors
- commissioning local research through local groups to feed into the proposals – for example arts or history projects
- setting up a drop-in space where people can share their views
- taking a stand at local exhibitions, fetes, carnivals or sponsoring local cultural events
- supporting local public projects about local energy
- holding focus groups, facilitated workshops or meeting community liaison groups
- using social media and public relations campaigns

Or going further still:

- engaging in local supply chain and skills development initiatives
- developing local procurement policies and open days for local suppliers
- taking on apprentices from the local community
- creative ideas, such as those documented by Eden Project[10]

Following up on feedback

It is very important to act on feedback gathered from stakeholder meetings and events and to follow up on engagement work. Developers may gather useful information which could influence the project. Some of the ways in which feedback can been addressed might include:

- adopting suggestions for amending a proposal where feasible
- specifying construction traffic routes based on local feedback
- incorporating planting measures suggested by community members
- responding to queries with further information
- not going ahead with the project

If changes are made following feedback, let people know. This could be through an update newsletter, the project website/social media page, or by directly contacting the Parish or Community Council. These direct communications are invaluable, and are complimentary to the consultation report (see text box on reporting).

Even if no amendments are needed, or proposed amendments are not feasible, it is still worth updating the community when submitting the planning application.

10 See https://www.edenproject.com/eden-story/our-ethos/creative-community-engagement

Figure 3 Fun at an open day. Photo courtesy of Enphase

7 Construction

The relationship with the community does not cease on receipt of a planning permission. Construction is the most visible phase of the project and building and maintaining good relationships with those directly affected by the construction helps ensure that concerns and issues can be addressed promptly.

Traffic management can have a significant impact both locally and on communities further afield. Contractors may want to consider committing to national schemes, such as considerate constructors, that have a set of standards and provide a third party review of the construction phase engagement.

If the site is to be built by another party, developers should carry out a formal "handover" exercise with those managing the construction, outlining the relationships established during the development stage. This means introducing new points of contact to local residents, being clear about the role split between the developer organisation and the construction company[11], and providing new contact numbers.

The main point of contact must be fully-briefed on the project, and understand anything that could be considered as relevant by the community, such as site history, planning obligations, details of any objections received during the planning stages and who's who in the local area. This demonstrates competency and thoroughness to stakeholders. Ensure no inherited commitments are lost in the handover.

Community liaison during construction may involve handling complaints and it is essential that the person responsible responds positively and takes action to stop problems recurring. It is advisable to keep a communications log. Not everyone in the local community will want to be involved, whereas others will and the main point of contact will need to be adaptive.

As before, keep the community updated on progress, either via email, letter, social media, informal encounters or even organised public meetings or exhibitions. Cover details such as: expected construction start and finish dates; activities involved in construction; and likely programme of deliveries and their route to site. A UK mobile or landline number for the contact point should be displayed on boards surrounding the site.

Small gestures go a long way during construction and site induction or "toolbox" talks should cover good practice community relations. Tools can include:

- considerate construction techniques
- road closure notices on road signs, in local newspapers / newsletters
- construction traffic giving local road users right of way where possible
- a local speed limit for the project
- contracting road sweepers to keep the roads clear of debris
- a traffic management plan which aims to avoid local schools at drop off and pick up times
- staff working on site being polite and friendly with local residents

Where possible, use local suppliers and amenities (hotels, restaurants, local contractors etc.).

11 Although it should be noted that the public may not necessarily appreciate the difference.

Figure 4 Site safety and speed signage. Photo courtesy of Primrose Solar

Figure 5 Briefing the contractors. Photo courtesy of Primrose Solar

8 Operation

Typically the construction company deals with the ongoing operation and maintenance (O&M) services for at least two years post-construction. After this time the owner may employ a specialist O&M company, in which case another handover, as described above, should be carried out. This should also be done if the solar farm is sold to a new owner.

Ideally the site key holder should be locally-based. Often landlords will carry out land management and ground works. Indeed this may have been a commitment entered into by the project developer and covered in lease or side agreements as well as within conditions attached to the planning consent (e.g. a land and environmental management plan). These obligations must then pass to the O&M providers, via the owner of the solar farm.

There are many additional activities in which solar farm owners and O&M providers could continue to engage the wider community, some ideas include: launch parties, official openings, guided tours, information display boards, site visits, art or other competitions for school children, biodiversity studies/wildlife monitoring, research programmes, activities including educational or environmental rangers, as well as information updates and publicising community benefit funds.

Figure 6 A guided tour. Photo courtesy of Big60Million

9 Conclusion

Good community engagement is important throughout the life of a project, and there will often be more than one company involved. Each is responsible for ensuring that the community is engaged in a positive manner, and formal handovers between stages will assist in making the transitions more seamless.

Poor community engagement at any stage will impact on the companies and individuals involved down the line, just as it can on future projects developed by others. Companies should regard themselves as ambassadors for this important new sector. Solar PV currently enjoys the highest satisfaction and support ratings of any renewable energy technology, and it is important that all companies play their part in keeping it that way.

Figure 7 Educational display. Photo courtesy of Big60Million

10 Case studies

Wroughton Airfield Solar Farm (41MWp) developed by Public Power Solutions

Wroughton, Wiltshire

Community sentiment wins out at Public Inquiry

The solar farm sits on the former WWII airfield used by the Science Museum for storing its large objects. The airfield itself lies within the northern edge of the North Wessex Downs AONB and at the foot of the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Barbury Castle – a challenging site to build a solar park! So in January 2013, in the deep snow in the middle of the airfield and live on BBC news, the developers stated that if the public didn't want a solar park there, it wouldn't be built.

Public Power Solutions carried out a very widespread engagement campaign, including TV slots, radio interviews and newspaper articles, as well as hand-delivering over 8,000 invitations to the public consultation event. Over 600 residents walked through the door on the day. The developers were there to listen as well as to share ideas, and in response received over 100 questionnaires, 80% of which were strongly in support of the project. It took three months following the consultation for the developers to incorporate local residents' suggestions and ideas into the project plans. In December 2013 the Local Authority Planning Committee recommended the project be approved, but under pressure from the AONB and English Heritage the Secretary of State called it in for Public Inquiry.

Further consultation was carried out in the run up to the Inquiry, during which the level of public support rose to well over 90%. For two weeks in September 2014 arguments were heard both for and against the project. The local MP, local councillors and residents spoke in support.

In March 2015, Eric Pickles (the then Secretary of State for DCLG) granted the application and both the Planning Inspector and Eric Pickles cited community support as a primary reason for approval.

> *"The Secretary of State has also had regard to the fact that there is widespread support from the local community for the development and, like the Inspector (IR415), he has given weight to the views of local residents in the overall planning balance."*
> **DCLG 18th March 2015**

This statement is highly significant, because at the Council Planning Committee meeting in December 2013, the Committee was instructed by the Head of Planning and Legal Advisor to ignore the community support, as it did not have any weight in a planning decision.

This case study illustrates how making the community a fundamental part of a project, along with having the right project, in the right place, for the right reasons – gives a much better chance of deploying truly community-based sustainable projects.

Wroughton Airfield Solar Farm. Photo courtesy of Public Power Solutions

St Francis Farm (4.33MWp) developed and operated by Lightsource

St Francis Farm, Catsfield, East Sussex

How effective community engagement turned public opinion around

"We believe in developing solar farm schemes that communities can be proud of. This is why we carry out an extensive community consultation, engaging directly with the community and interest groups alongside our consultants to ensure the outcome of our proposals take into account sensitivities within the local area. This is a long-term relationship and we want to be good neighbours."
Conor McGuigan, Business Development Director, Lightsource Renewable Energy Ltd

This project initially faced significant opposition but following adaptations made as a consequence of effective community engagement, this was reversed.

On the face of it, the site was ideal for a solar farm, being visually well-contained by mature boundary vegetation, on lower grade land, and in close proximity to a viable grid connection. However, at the drop in information evening, the majority of the approximately 120 attendees expressed strong concerns about the proposal. It became apparent that the landowner unofficially allowed riders who used the adjacent livery to ride their horses around the fields on which the solar farm was proposed, and community members were concerned that the solar farm would prevent this. 83% of the feedback forms received were unsupportive of the proposal, and the potential impact on the livery was identified as the number one concern.

On returning from the event, a debriefing session was held to look at the concerns and how these could be addressed. Over the coming months, Lightsouce worked closely with the livery operator to assess whether it was possible to both develop a solar farm, and avoid impacts on the horse riding community. It was agreed that the best solution was to provide a new all-weather riding track around the outside of the solar farm – this would have the benefit of allowing riders to use the fields year round, as the fields became too waterlogged during winter – in addition, one of the three fields was removed from the proposal entirely, as this field was used for eventing.

A second drop in event was held to discuss the revised plans; these were well received, and in a turn-around from the previous event, only 10% of attendees remained unsupportive of the new proposal. One attendee commented on their feedback form that *"horse riding is dangerous on the roads, so what a lovely idea to propose horse tracks"* and another noted that they were *"much happier now the all-weather riding track is there."*

Following the positive response of the amended plans, a planning application was submitted – during the Council's determination process 7 representations of support were received, and 8 objections – a significant reduction from the level of opposition the proposal originally faced. The site was approved in planning, and construction was completed in March 2015, with the horse track coming in to use the following month.

St Francis Farm, Catsfield, East Sussex. Photo courtesy of Lightsource

Norrington Solar Farm (10MWp)

Broughton Gifford, Wiltshire

A case of a planning permission being revoked through incorrect consultation

Case study provided by
Fergus Charlton,
Associate of law firm TLT

Securing planning permission takes a great deal of time, effort and money, which can be wasted if that permission is subsequently lost. There are only a few ways is which this can happen, and with good project management and community engagement it can be avoided.

The most pernicious way a planning permission can be lost is when it is quashed by the High Court following judicial review (JR). This is a process whereby the court is asked to review the local authority's decision. It does so at the request of a party who has shown an interest in the process and who is dissatisfied by the decision. The court considers whether the determination process undertaken by the local planning authority adhered to the statutory requirements, and was fair and reasonable in all other respects.

If the correct procedure was not followed, or the decision to grant planning permission was not fair and reasonable, then the court can order that the planning permission be quashed. In these circumstances the local planning authority has to re-determine the planning application afresh, taking into account anything the court may have said about the legality of the original decision. There can be no guarantee that the planning authority will approve the application the second time around. If it does not then any part of the solar farm already constructed under the quashed planning permission is rendered unlawful and may have to be removed.

Developers usually protect themselves against this judicial review threat by waiting for the JR window to close. In almost all circumstances a planning permission can only be challenged by way of JR within the first six weeks following the decision to grant. Thereafter it is only in the most unusual circumstances that a JR can be successful. This did occur, however, with Norrington Solar Farm.

The solar farm was constructed over a year after planning permission was granted. It was at this time that the owner of the nearby Grade II* listed Gifford Hall applied to judicially review the decision. Despite being well outside the JR window, the Court quashed the planning permission because there had been several procedural mistakes, including a failure to consult with English Heritage and lack of notification of the owner of Gifford Hall.

The court made its ruling in March 2015. The developer has appealed but this will not be heard until early next year. In the meantime the solar farm development has no planning permission, and if the appeal is unsuccessful it will have to be dismantled and the land restored.

Gower Power Co-op CIC

A perspective from a community energy group

I suppose you could say we've got a foot in both camps. We are working with commercial developers to help them put their large projects into community ownership, plus looking to develop some smaller community-led projects of our own. Changes to the financial incentives have resulted in many larger solar projects having to incorporate community ownership, otherwise they wouldn't be able to proceed.

Tapping into commercial organisations' expertise can be a real benefit. They have a track record, technical expertise and they are experienced in dealing with risk. Understandably they will want to maximise the value to reflect the risk they have taken, but this leaves less for the community. Overall the partnership can work well, particularly as many less established community groups rely on voluntary work and grants. Lots of these groups are starting up at the moment, although there are also some larger, more established community groups which are getting much more effective at delivering at scale and maximising the flow of benefits into the community.

I've found that commercial developers are rarely looking to the community as an important source of finance for their project. The ones that are best at community engagement are those that want to work with the community to de-risk their sites during planning, but to do so through a genuine desire for their support and participation. They want to deliver a high-quality product and effective community engagement is central to that. They come across as being part of a broader sustainability movement, rather than commercial companies just in it for the money. Communities differ, of course, but in many places they wouldn't be able to or interested in funding a project in any case. For example it is doubtful whether some of the larger projects we are looking at developing could be funded entirely by a community share offer.

It is definitely up to the commercial sector to raise community engagement standards, as in the long run, the more benefits local communities see from renewable energy development, the sooner cultural attitudes, i.e. NIMBYism are likely to change, which ultimately would be in both the renewable energy industry and communities' long term interests.
Ant Flanagan, Gower Power Co-operative

Southwick Solar Farm (48MWp) owned and operated by Primrose Solar

Near Fareham, Hampshire

An example of community engagement during construction and operation

Working with Solarcentury, Primrose set a new environmental standard in construction of a solar farm with measures including composting toilets, solar-powered and biodiesel generators and a car-sharing scheme for construction staff.

Community relations were also paramount, and discussed at every site team meeting, with only health & safety ranking higher on the agenda. The Project Manager personally introduced himself to neighbours prior to construction. A press release to the local paper informed the wider community that construction was about to get underway and contact details were provided. The community liaison officer's telephone number was displayed at the main entrance to the site.

During the construction neighbours received regular updates any issues they raised were logged, tracked and resolved quickly, with a personal visit where possible. Traffic banksmen held HGVs in a waiting area so that local traffic could take priority, also minimising inconvenience to other road users as well as ensuring highway safety. The car-pooling system helped in reducing traffic and potholes were filled in as quickly as possible.

The local economy benefited from the renting of parking and storage areas from neighbours; staff staying in local hotels and B&Bs; catering for construction staff with locally-sourced and organic food, and local contractors providing reinstatement works. ARUN Services, Solarcentury's principal subcontractor, based just 30 miles away carried out most of the construction. Local beekeepers were invited to keep hives on the site once landscaping works were complete.

Now operational, the sites uses local businesses for ongoing maintenance. There are also regular educational talks and guided walks, information boards, open days for local schools and business; and near-live generation data on Primrose's website.

Richard Griffen, local beekeeper, said

"When the grasses and wildflowers are established my bees will make good use of the variety of forage. It is great that your company has been amenable to accommodate the interests and needs of local people. I'm also looking forward to forging some links between the solar farm and South Downs College. Some of my students would get a great deal from finding out about solar power and the stewardship that goes alongside the development and on-going functioning of the site."

Giles Clark, CEO Primrose Solar, said:

"For the next 25 years, Primrose wants to be a good neighbour, supporting the local community and working with the landowner to demonstrate responsible stewardship of the land for the lifetime of the solar farm. So it's really important to start as we mean to go on, by taking responsibility during the construction phase and forging good long-term relationships with the local community."

Wildflowers in bloom at Southwick solar farm.
Photo courtesy of Primrose Solar

Park Farm (12.9MWp) developed by Solstice Renewables

Measham, Leicestershire

Working with the younger generation

Solar parks offer a great opportunity for schoolchildren to learn not only about renewable energy, but also biodiversity and planning.

Solstice Renewables offers funding for educational initiatives at local schools for the 25-year life of its projects, as well as traditional community benefit funds. The funding is used for site visits and tailored learning sessions, delivered by an educational consultant working closely with school teaching staff. The sessions aim to educate future consumers about the causes and challenges of climate change and energy generation and consumption, relating this to their schools, homes, communities and the wider world. Resources dovetail with the National Curriculum and are designed to support learning from the Foundation Stage to Year 8. The company's ambition is for local schools to embed these opportunities into day-to-day learning and for children to aspire to careers in science.

At Park Farm three local primary schools were approached during the pre-planning consultation. In June 2014 a site visit for the eco-councils from Measham and Packington primary schools took place, accompanied by the schools' two head teachers. (Eco-councils or committees are representative bodies comprising students, and sometimes parents and teachers, who work with the aim of improving environmental performance. For more information see http://eco-schools.org.uk/aboutecoschools) The visit included a bug-hunt to understand biodiversity and sessions on energy efficiency and the importance of renewables in tackling climate change.

Feedback was excellent, and a follow up visit to see the site in operation took place in June 2015, this time including St. Charles school's eco-council. These schools can look forward to future site visits, workshops and small grants for their eco-council initiatives.

"It has been a fantastic opportunity for the children of both schools to discuss possible future renewable energy solutions and to be able to relate these to their own schools and local community."
Mrs Price, Headteacher
Packington Primary School

"We're very pleased that Measham and Packington schools are so enthusiastic about using the solar park as an opportunity to learn about energy and biodiversity. Practical experience outside the classroom is a great way to teach children about aspects of energy consumption and generation. They can follow the progress of the solar park from planning through development and construction, which will give them an insight into the business aspects and considerations for the local community as well."
Giovanni Maruca, Director
Solstice Renewables

Children at Park Farm. Photo courtesy of Solstice Renewables

Willersey Solar Farm (3.8MWp) developed by BELECTRIC UK and Big60Million

Willersey, Gloucestershire

Turning around public opinion through investment

In consultations in early 2014, Willersey Solar Farm faced strong opposition, with negative coverage reaching the national press. Local objectors felt their environment and farming heritage were under threat, and they were getting nothing in return. This inspired BELECTRIC to set up a community benefit energy company, Big60Million, whose mission was to share financial, environmental and social benefits from solar farms with local residents.

The developer promoted Big60Million Solar Bonds (Europe's first accredited Climate Bond scheme) in the locality, as a low-risk, high-yield investment opportunity and a way of benefiting financially from the solar farm. A habitat management plan was also developed, which included hedgerow and wildflower planting, beehives, a pond, bird and mammal boxes and a hibernaculum constructed from stones and vegetation to shelter reptiles, amphibians and insect life. Local schools were involved in projects including seed planting and bird boxes.

These activities were publicised through meetings with community groups, open days, and through the local media. As a result, public opinion shifted dramatically in favour of the project and the bond issue was over-subscribed. In April 2015, Big60Million held an investor day at Willersey Solar Farm to celebrate its first bond payments. Many investors attended and expressed their continued support. The event received extensive coverage from the BBC, which helped with the next Big60Million solar bond offering.

"The opportunity to invest money in something that is both going to produce energy for people, free, from the sun, and also make a financial return, that's a positive investment with a double whammy as far as I'm concerned."

"I think climate change is the most important issue affecting the human community at the moment. I've got children and grandchildren and that's the world they're going to grow up in, and it's a world that is going to deeply affect their lifestyles and their hope of a comfortable society to live in."
The Reverend David Haslam, a local investor in our Willersey Solar Farm

"In many ways, Willersey set the template for the community solar energy projects now encouraged by planning authorities. Before Willersey, our approach to solar farm consultations was: don't worry, you won't be able to see it, you won't even know it's there. Now we say: we're bringing you a renewable energy asset that you can be proud of, and that will bring the following benefits to your local community… People respond much better and become involved. If we can get communities on our side by going out and promoting the benefits of solar, people will respond and become our best advocates."
Toddington Harper, CEO of BELECTRIC UK and Big60Million

David Haslam at Willersey. Photo courtesy of Big60Million

Canworthy (42MWp) project, constructed and operated by Solaer-UK and PS Renewables

Launceston, Cornwall

The importance of traffic management in construction

"It is hugely important that there is minimal impact on the local community who are trying go about their daily business during the construction of a solar park. Often these sites are located in very rural areas where the roads are narrow and fields inaccessible. For Canworthy, before we could even dig the first trench, we had to build an access road. This meant our traffic management plan was key, and during the busy times we got an additional 4 banksman to direct and control traffic."
Matt Hazell, Commercial Sales Director of PS Renewables

Engaging actively with the local community, and building a level of trust early in the relationship is especially important with traffic management plans for large solar projects, which can take several months to build. PS Renewables is always looking at ways to ease any potential congestion, for example implementing strategic traffic lights or building passing spaces on narrow roads. Prior to starting the construction, the company did a leaflet drop to the residents of Canworthy Water and surrounding areas, which were going to be most affected by the construction traffic coming from the A39. This informed the local residents that the approved solar park would soon be built, and that the construction team would actively manage local traffic plans with the local authority.

During the build, both companies kept in constant contact with local residents to deal with any concerns. Construction traffic drove particularly slowly where certain residential properties were close to the road, and the road was kept clear at school drop off and pick up times.

Measures were taken to ensure that impact on the local environment was minimal, including filtering run-off water prior to its entry into the local stream; making holes in the hedgerows to ensure free movement of small mammals (a requirement of Biodiversity Management Plan), and replacing certain hedgerows.

In order to support the local economy 60 staff members stayed in locally-run holiday accommodation, and the companies facilitated conversations with the local council to ensure the unilateral agreement with the owner, Primrose Solar and the local council were reached.

Canworthy. Photo courtesy of PS Renewables

Lower Stanley Solar Farm (5MWp) developed by Green Hedge Renewables

Gretton Fields, Tewkesbury

Supporters overturn delegated refusal

At 6:30pm on the 1st August 2015 Lower Stanley Solar Farm was turned down under delegated powers. Green Hedge felt that planning officers had overreacted to the landscape comments and not given enough weight to the environmental and community benefits or the level of local support. They got in touch with their support network and an hour later, four of the local Ward Councillors and the Parish Chair had been deluged by local supporters lobbying them to get the application referred to planning committee. Consequently the application was called in and approved 12 votes to 4, with members going against the officer's recommendation.

The case officer's report said that the scheme would have a detrimental impact on the distant views from the AONB. The supporters disagreed, believing the impact would be negligible; they supported renewable energy and liked the way the developer was working with the community. They wrote letters of support, lobbied the key decision makers and attended media interviews. Talking to the community and building relations and trust, was central to the developer's PR plan. They had personally visited all the immediate neighbours; stated they would not continue with the scheme if feedback was negative; listened carefully; introduced their consultants to those with real concerns (such as landscaping) and revised the plans where possible in response to suggestions.

The developers had originally wanted this to be a community-owned solar farm, but unfortunately this fell through. Instead they helped set up a local trust, run by members of the local community, which will administer a community benefit fund of £4000pa to support local initiatives and promote sustainability.

Through its positive community engagement the developer had built a strong and committed local support network. Following the initial decision these supporters posted nearly 60 letters of support to the planning officer and committee members. The developers helped mobilise them following the initial decision, and spent three days canvasing local residents, providing leaflets explaining the negatives and positives, putting 'say yes' signs up in people's gardens, arranging interviews with the local media and having a local resident speak at committee.

The final outcome was a triumph for localism.

Crossroads Plantation Solar Farm (4.9MWp) owned and operated by Good Energy

Alderholt, Dorset

An example of a community benefit package

Following planning approval for Crossroads Solar Farm in the summer of 2014, Good Energy set about proving to the residents of Alderholt that the construction of a solar farm in their community would be a positive experience.

The company wanted to build on the good relationship with the parish council and local residents established during the development phase, and great emphasis was put on good communication. Prior to construction public meetings, letters, phone calls and door-to-door visits were all used to ensure that as many people as possible knew what to expect. The access route to the solar farm was through a residential cul-de-sac, not ideal by any building contractor's standards which made the direct community approach all the more important. Direct lines of communication with individual members of the Good Energy team allowed for issues during the construction to be resolved before they escalated.

In June 2015 local residents were invited to celebrate the site's completion. The response from both the local primary school and local residents was overwhelming and glowing reports of how the construction process was handled were abundant.

A community-led group was set up to manage the distribution of the community fund associated with the project and Good Energy is also installing a solar PV system for St James' First School and upgrading Alderholt Village Hall's boiler. As part of its local community commitment – a way of saying 'thank you' for hosting a Good energy development.

"We have been very pleased with the whole process. Good Energy have communicated well, been considerate and dealt efficiently and effectively with any concerns and issues that have arisen, resulting in minimal impact on the community We enjoyed our recent site visit and it is good to know that Alderholt is helping in the future of renewable energy."

"We now look forward to continuing the relationship with them in both their management of the solar farm and with the community fund which will be of benefit to all Alderholt residents throughout the next 30 years."
Testimonial from Alderholt Parish Council

"Without public support, the UK won't be able to develop renewable generation at the pace or scale needed to meet the UK's carbon reduction targets or energy security objectives."

"We're committed to engaging with communities throughout the lifetime of all our generation projects. At the development stage we listen carefully to the community and improve our plans accordingly. This also helps us identify opportunities for the project to benefit the local area, including through shared ownership. We want all for our sites to become a valuable asset for the communities hosting them."
James Ryle, Communities Manager

Crossroads Plantation Solar Farm. Photo courtesy of Good Energy

BRE Trust
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