



Workshop #2 - *Early feedback from a new community energy group bringing the Big Solar Co-op concept to their area*

Facilitators: Steve Martin, Derbyshire Dales Community Energy (DDCE) & Richard Lane, Big Solar Co-op

Aim of workshop

To explore early feedback from a new community energy group bringing the Big Solar Co-op concept to their local area.

What we want to come out with?

- An understanding of why it is helpful for a local project to deliver through a national co-op and how this can help to overcome the challenges faced by community energy projects
- Reflections on how community groups can represent and advocate for the Big Solar Co-op to local partners (e.g. councils, activists)

Format (45mins)

Workshop style around a big table in main room or in cafe

1. Show of hands to indicate how many people have already set up a local community energy group and how many are thinking about it.
2. 2 minute intro from Steve to talk about the setting up of Derbyshire Dales Community energy and where we currently are with it.
3. Kick off question: What are the challenges that local activists face getting solar on local sites?
4. Challenges/topics listed on flipchart
5. Show of hands to find out which topics people would like to discuss in more depth: These topics can then be discussed in order of priority in the remaining 40 minutes

Outcomes

- Room a good mix of people involved with community energy groups (incorporated and otherwise) and individual volunteers
- Introduction to the project: Council commissioned a climate survey in which 25% of people in the Derbyshire Dales expressed support for community energy. Matlock Town Council subsequently applied for funding from RCEF, which was essentially managed for them by DDCE. This identified two sites. DDCE then went on to apply for stage 2 funding (project delivered by Sharenergy) which recommended bringing in more sites - aiming for 1MW. If all sites currently in the picture come through (which will require the co-operation of an Academy Trust), the possible total at the moment is over 1.2MW. DDCE took the decision to bring these sites to the Big Solar

Co-op.

- **Challenge one: Pitching Big Solar Co-op's offer for community benefit**
 - Derbyshire Dales are involving one site (Hurst Farm) which would not be considered viable but is an important and high profile local community resource: what Big Solar Co-op refers to as a "cherished site", so the energy bill reduction for them is a material community benefit
 - We are helping communities (and local authorities) achieve their decarbonisation goals. This is itself a community benefit.
 - By doing so we allow the community/local authority to aim higher with its budget.
- **Challenge two: Pitching Big Solar Co-op to funders (RCEF)**
 - Practicality: this will make it happen. Without Big Solar's involvement most sites will not happen, or will require a lot of input (capital and labour) which will in turn reduce ambition elsewhere.
- **Question: what was the motivation for DDCE in taking sites to Big Solar?**
 - The complexity was greater than expected: the need to take on a portfolio of sites, given the abolition of FiTs, magnified the effort required. The first RCEF project did not address this; it only emerged in the second phase.
 - This also brings a significant admin burden, for decades.
 - We have good relations with the sites and the Councils - we had something significant to offer Big Solar Co-op, as well as the Council. Community energy is built on relationships, and Councils are not necessarily good at this sort of community engagement! Can also help with promoting a share offer, to have a local advocate.
 - (This also ties in with the EnergyLocal model, which could be very compatible with the Big Solar Co-op model in places: providing a better income for the generator, better prices locally. But the income from such a system is hard to predict in advance so does not affect the viability of projects)
- **Question: could the work of bringing these sites to Big Solar Co-op have been done without RCEF?**
 - In retrospect yes: other funding sources are available. The Council hinted that it might be able to find some money if needed (it hasn't been - but a regional co-ordinator post has been funded and filled since).
 - There is the Shared Prosperity Fund (though stiff competition for it) and community development funding, both of which have to be applied to through a council.
 - There is also the possibility of community fundraising - Derbyshire is a wealthy area and there is significant support for making solar happen. A communities raised a lot of money to buy a woodland without expecting to see a return on that.
 - Aside: there can be a tension between Council and community groups as to which is a truer 'community representative'
 - Funding is not always (often isn't) the most significant block to a project! Volunteer capacity is more often the limiting factor and burnout is a huge risk to manage.
 - But funding does bring credibility and can provide capacity as well as paying for site development work.

DERBYSHIRE DALES

? HOW TO SELL COMMUNITY BENEFIT THROUGH BIG SOLAR COOP?

• "CHERISHED SITES" - SUPPORTING SMALL ARRAY AT SOCIAL LOCATION

• DECARBONISATION - ACHIEVING CLIMATE GOALS

• SCALE UP POSSIBLE: GREATER AMBITION

? HOW TO SELL BENEFIT TO FUNDERS (RCEF)

• PRACTICALITY - MAKING IT HAPPEN!

? WHAT WAS THE MOTIVATION FOR TAKING SITES TO BSC?

• COMPLEXITY GREATER THAN EXPECTED

• GOOD RELATIONS WITH SITES & COUNCILS - A GOOD OFFER FOR BIG SOLAR COOP! A FAIR EXCHANGE.

——— AVOID ADMIN BURDEN

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT - THE STRENGTH OF THIS MODEL

↳ RELATIONSHIP LED. COUNCILS NOT SO GOOD AT THIS!

PROMOTING SHARE OFFER TOO - LOCAL ADVOCATE.

~~WORKS~~

(ALSO TIES IN WITH ENERGY LOCAL MODEL)

↳ BETTER INCOME FOR GENERATOR

↳ BETTER PRICES LOCALLY

↳ HARD TO PREDICT IN ADVANCE

? COULD THIS HAVE BEEN DONE WITHOUT RCEF?

- IN HINDSIGHT YES - OTHER FUNDING SOURCES (eg. COUNCILS)
- COMMUNITY FUNDRAISING - ~~eg.~~ c.f. BUYING COMMUNITY (WIND) LAND

TENSION BETWEEN COUNCILS AS COMMUNITY REPS
& COMMUNITY ORGS

- COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT FUNDING
- SHARED PROSPERITY FUND - STIFF COMPETITION

FUNDING NOT ALWAYS (?OFTEN) THE SIGNIFICANT BLOCK
- BUT BRINGS CREDIBILITY + CAPACITY FOR SITE DEV, SURVEYS ETC.

VOLUNTEER CAPACITY OFTEN THE LIMITING FACTOR

- BURN OUT

- ETHICAL POINT: PPL SHOULD BE PAID IF PART OF A COMMERCIAL SYSTEM?
↳ FOR ENERGY LOCAL