

Chair's Report 2016

Overview

This has been an outstanding year for the Bristol Energy Cooperative. Since the last financial year we have increased our solar generation assets from c. £250k to around £10.5M – an increase of more than forty times! We are now the proud owners of not one, but two solar farms, and an expanded portfolio of solar roofs around Bristol. This has only been possible due to herculean efforts from our staff and volunteers, and the support of trusted partners, in particular Mongoose and Bristol City Council, and of course our members and other investors who put their faith in us. This expansion means that we are finally able to begin to develop our Community Fund; the details are still being worked out, but initial funds have already been provided to Ambition Lawrence Weston. In the meantime we continue to run workshops on sustainability, support the Bristol Energy Network and promote the concept of 'Zero carbon Bristol', while developing new strategies to expand even further in the future.

New Installations and Fundraising

Following our success in winning the tender to install PV on Bristol Council-owned community buildings, we set about raising money for these and to build a 4.2MWp solar farm at Lawrence Weston. We were also with an opportunity to buy an already-constructed 4.6 MWp solar farm at Puriton, near Bridgewater in Somerset. While this increased an already ambitious target, we decided to go for it! This created an overall fund-raising target of £10.5M, of which a significant fraction would come from commercial loans. This still left about £4M to be raised from other sources. A tremendous effort was put into a third share offer, which raised a total of £904k; we could have raised more by this route but for a HMRC decision to withdraw EIS tax relief from community energy schemes in November. To close the gap, for the first time we offered a fixed-term bond, firstly as a three-year bond, raising £563k, and then (following feedback from potential investors) a two-year bond and a minibond, raising a further £2M. In combination with additional investment from Bristol City Council, Pure Leapfrog and Bristol Credit Union, we reached our target! The tight timescales of the various projects made this a complex exercise – there wasn't time to raise all the money first and then spend it, as project costs for the two solar farms needed to be covered even while the fundraising was continuing. With the help of goodwill from various partners in this process and sustained and skilful effort from our staff and Board and our partner Mongoose, this was achieved without any crucial deadlines being missed.

Meanwhile we were pressing ahead with the complex process of negotiating 18 community roof projects, against a deadline determined by the expiry of our pre-registration for FiT subsidies. Unfortunately, many of these projects fell by the wayside for reasons outside our control, but six came to fruition, with a total capacity of 110kWp, namely:

Easton Community Centre phase 2

Brentry Childrens Centre
Coniston Community Centre
ACTA
Wick Sports Ground
The Architecture Centre

Taking our portfolio up to eleven roofs and 253kWp altogether; and another two were installed by us on behalf of the council:

Hartcliffe Community Farm
Inns Court.

New Personnel

In addition to the appointment of Andy O'Brien as a full-time project development manager that was reported last year, this year we have appointed an additional paid director (Chris Speller) and a full-time administrator, Vicky Wakefield-Jarrett. Vicky has also taken over the job of co-ordinating our team of volunteers, who remain vital to the co-op. As a result of this expansion, we have also had to engage in setting up a PAYE scheme and pension arrangements for our staff.

We have also welcomed three new directors onto our board, to assist with the increasingly complex task of overseeing the management and direction of our newly expanded organisation: David Bunker; Jeff Kenna; and Daniella Radice. David and Jeff are connected with Mongoose, our development partner for the larger projects, and Daniella is a former Bristol Green Party councillor.

New Partnerships

In addition to our on-going partnership with Bristol City Council, which has been crucial in our latest tranche of roof projects and the Lawrence Weston Solar Farm, we have developed strong new partnerships in the course of delivering the two solar farms. In connection with the Lawrence Weston Solar Farm, we established close working relationships with Ambition Lawrence Weston and Solarcentury, the installation contractor. We also joined with Mongoose, a cooperative spun out of Bath and West Community Energy with the express purpose of supporting community energy organisations. Their experience was invaluable in working through the many details of the solar farm projects, and also with organising a complex and multi-faceted fund-raising exercise. To maximise our access to this capability, we brought two Mongoose directors onto the BEC Board, David Bunker and Jeff Kenna.

The Future

Our success has been achieved in spite of an adverse climate for community energy in the UK. Despite considerable turmoil in the national government, hostility towards renewable energy in general and community energy in particular continues, while mind-boggling subsidies are offered to nuclear power. The uncertainty generated by the EU referendum decision does not make things any easier! We have not had much time to think about these issues while

busy completing our recent projects, but as this workload diminishes we will develop new strategies to take forward our objectives:

- To enable meaningful cuts in carbon emissions, and reduce dependence on unsustainable sources of energy.
- To fund and implement renewable energy and energy efficiency measures, in collaboration with people, communities and businesses.
- To work co-operatively with people and communities to make carbon reduction technologies available to all regardless of financial resources, and support mutual action to respond to the challenges of climate change.

In particular we will be focusing in getting our community fund going; we have already received many expressions of interest, and have clear plans for the organization and running of the fund.